

Sensual



a novel
BOB MARTEL

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A novel by Bob Martel

In the Northern Michigan woods the issues of the day have to do with snow, fishing, hunting, planting and harvest. The winters are cold and colorless. The people are unusual by city standards. Small towns, places with a church, a grocery with gas and a bar slash restaurant dot the State and in Leelanau County there is nothing else. In the winter, there is nothing but time. Leelanau is famous for its writers.

“I never fell in love with a plumber.” She said.

“What a funny thing to say. What am I? A potted plant?”

“You’ll do, but you are poor with the wrenches.”

“Except for yours.” He demurred.

“Oh, that again. It was a joke.”

“I laughed at the time, but it has taken on a new meaning since.”

“I thought you wanted to be a sex object. You said something flirty and I said, ‘I have a wrench that will turn your nu...’”

“Yes, but now when I figured out how you came by this house I get a different more sinister meaning: You have used your wrench many times.”

“Are you starting a fight with me? If you are, there's no room for you here.”

“Hmmm. You’ve lost your sense of humor.”

“You are not my biographer. Leave my narrative alone.”

“What? You admit it. You have used sex to get free labor to build your house.”

“My home ... not house.” She was getting mad at him. “There is more to how this home was built than that.”

“Home? That makes a difference. That explains the kids.” I said. “You built a family.”

“Yeah.”

“That makes it more than pleasure, more than free labor. You got more than a kitchen sink installed.”

“Are you heckling me? What’s the point?”

“I do not want to be cast aside for a plumber. I am a writer. You are a story.”

“I am not over. Your book will never end.”

“I have a trick. You’ll see.” He laughed a sweet laugh, opened a notebook and began to read.

The house was a hodge-podge of this and that placed here and there like any hodge-podge. Take away the mess, the stuff that covered everything with daily life and there it was: The house, itself, left without the distraction of objects in chaos, was as orderly as it should be. The furniture - leftovers from two marriages, a dozen relationships, and dozens more affairs - stood on the solid oak floor, affixed by habit.

The beginning of the house was lost in the work that followed as rooms were added down hallways that set off in two directions from the small ante-room the front door emptied into. Its name was mud room. The floor was worn from work boots and the tips of skis that lined the mud room walls. Behind the skis, the walls were rough-cut cedar with pegs spaced to hold coats and hats.

At times the mud room was full of every jacket and coat owned by the family. The floor was covered with muddy-wet or snow-caked boots. The place filled with the season's abundance. There wasn't a mud room with space for people.

Before it was a mud room it was part of a ten by ten cabin: One door, two windows, a stove and a loft with a mattress. Before that a tent. Before that a picnic blanket. Before that a small clearing in a large wood in Northern Michigan that no one had walked through in years, if ever.

She turned and saw her footprints laying down the new grass that replaced the light snow having melted in yesterday's afternoon sun.

"Here." She said to him.

He pulled the blanket from his pack and with a flourish only hopeful new lovers can exhibit, the blanket blossomed and fell to earth under her outstretched arm, under her fingers and onto the footprints she had so recently made.

"At long last." He said.

She took his hands and they sat facing each other the blanket underneath them.

"Yoga?" He asked.

"Never tried it."

"Meditation?"

“Sounds too lonely.”

“Your turn.”

“Let’s make a house.”

“And fill it with children?”

“House first. Little feet later.”

“I worked on a house last year. We built a deck on which a house was built. You know, foundation and all.”

“How about a small house here?”

“If that is what you want.”

“Let’s start here.” She said. Her arm extended to him, her hand rested on his left thigh above his knee. “We are going to need wood.”

It took two years or so for her to tell me some of the names and tales that raised the house from the earth to the three stories it eventually became. She had diaries and photo albums. “A hundred stories to build three stories” was how it seemed. “This book will be long.”

“No, it won’t. Some worked only for a day if that. Some stayed for other things, but not that many. Some needed a place to live, others needed a moments care, more like a sister than a lover.

“That window,” She pointed. He followed her arm to the wall behind him and the small window above the kitchen counter. “That one I found in a pile of stuff outside the recycling center. It said ‘free’ to me and I freed it from the pile. Someone noticed. Said he could help me install it. His name was Jeff. It was not love and pleasure. It was loneliness. I had time. He had a skill saw. Now there is a window.

“I think I scared him away. I made him work for food and all the rest. I had very little money for food, so we ate the fava beans I had saved over the winter for times like those.”

“Times of no money?”

“Yeah, no money. It was early Spring. The window let in the beauty of those days. The beans made me gassy. He took it badly. He went for cigarettes, he said, and he never came back.”

“What happened then?”

“I quit smoking.”

The house stood. I thought of it as a being, like Frankenstein's monster, built out of pieces that never were meant to be joined together.

"Tell me again about the guy who built the dome."

"That's my favorite part."

"It's your bedroom."

"It's round inside. He was a musician who learned carpentry. He carved his name into the base of the wall next to the heat stove."

"Says, 'Billie Nye.'"

"Quite a guy my Billie Nye."

"What's that from?"

"That's how I remember his name."

"How about his music?"

His music was too big for the house. Billie carried his flute into the woods and played to the birds that spring he came to live there.

“Too small in here. There must be room for music.”

“Is that why you spend so much time out in the rain?”

“I’d rather live in the wind than hide from it. Music travels in the wind. It is free. Inside, the walls confine the notes and they die, bashed back and forth between them.”

“Billie, you see things others don’t.”

“Like what?”

“Like another room on the house. A room for music for instance.”

“A dome.”

“A dome? Of course! I like that.”

The dome now stood, just like the small house. It had two doors and four windows all looking south. She would stand in the dome with its little stage with two music stands and a drum set. Billie put recording equipment in front of the stage. There was no seating in the dome. There was seldom an audience except for her. She would stand there in the doorway and listen to the melodies of his flute and watch his fingers dance along the valves.

She stood there in the dome the day that Billie came back to get his equipment. They said goodbye. Then he began to move out and was gone in minutes. She watched him as his back disappeared around the corner the door made as it opened outside to his car. The dome was empty and quiet.

She stood there feeling the peace of the moment.

She never said, “Billie is gone.”

“Why bother? Look, he was beautiful in his own way. Beauty lasts just a few moments. Think flowers.”

“You saying they come and they go?”

“Yes. Enjoy them. When they are gone plant more seeds and fertilize.”

“I see. What’s to become of me?”

“Keep writing and see.” She said.

“Are you saying what I think you are saying?”

“Everything, everything has an end.”

“No. That cannot be true. It may be the pattern, but it is not certain.”

“As certainly as sunsets.”

“I wrote that line.”

“I know.” She said.

I left that day. I left the house carrying my laptop. I intended to return when I left.
It was years before I did.

The house stood. The doors were locked. My key still worked. She was gone. It must have been some time ago. The hodge-podge was gone. The furniture remained as it was. There were no signs of the kids.

The desk I brought was there where I left it. My clothes hung in the closet next to hers.

For some reason this discovery brought tears to my eyes.

I had never been alone in the house before. There were drawers I had never opened. They all stood closed.

The first one I opened had dozens of her diaries. The second had pictures and albums. The album on top had a picture I recognized on the cover.

“I took that picture.”

It was of her standing outside at the door to the dome. Her two children, one on each side of her, smiled up at her. I opened the album.

There was a picture of a guy I never met. He was swinging a hammer putting siding on the hallway’s exterior wall, the one that connected the house to the dome. ‘Jim’ the white lettered caption declared.

‘Jim’ had two pictures. The next five were captioned ‘Carl’ with ‘Carl’ painting the walls in the dome with the color I first saw, when I first saw the dome the night she invited me to stay to help with the garden in the morning.

Then there was me wrestling with a rototiller. And me painting the dome a different color. And then me sitting at the desk writing. And then nothing. One third the way through the album the pictures stopped.

I was the last or at least the last with a picture.

I returned the album to the drawer.

I opened the drawer with the journals and found them to be her diaries. I closed the drawer; all her journals safely within.

“Not me. I can't read them.”

I would like to say, I had the courage to stay, but I did not. I looked around for signs of my return, saw I had left none, felt safe. My time here would go unnoticed. I walked out through the mud room looking into the woods that had changed with the years of growth during my five-year absence.

There she stood, across the meadow, leaning against an oak tree. She had a shotgun in her arms.

Violence, in general, guns, in particular, had crossed my path before.

“I come in peace.” I said and raised my hands over my head.

It’s funny what we assume the case to be, instead of taking a situation as presented, which is to say, I was surprised when the gun went off.

There was something that I had forgotten about her and something that I didn't know, that explained my shock well enough. But it was only after we were trying to make the best of it, that I realized she was a hunter and needed corrective lenses to see clearly at any distance and had none on that day.

She missed me was my first thought. I was standing in front of her house. She would wound me without a thought, I feared, but not the house. I looked around to see what of the house she had hit. She had shot the windshield out of my car instead.

What was she thinking? She was not surprised when she got close enough and saw the tattoo she had needled into the back of my neck that it was me. I had hit the ground and still lay like a suspect in a cop drama splayed out like an animal hide.

She had tattooed a Chinese symbol into my neck that I assumed said something sweet about me.

“106. Back for more?” She said it with no emotion. “Sorry about your ride. Didn’t know it was you. Since I know it’s you maybe I should take a few more shots at it?”

“If it would help, have at it.”

“I only have one shell left. I’ll show mercy on you as a sign you are welcome back after all.”

She surprised me. I was afraid of her. I stayed on the ground.

She aimed the gun and fired again.

“Out of ammo. You’ll need two new tires to get out of here.” She said. “Guess you came back to stay.”

“Can I get up?”

“It was your idea to be down there not mine.” As she spoke she sat down beside me. “Didn’t you feel at home? No one new has been here since you left. The kids went to California to live with their dads. I cleaned up the house yesterday and went hunting this morning looking for quail.”

“There’re no quail around here.”

“I didn’t want to kill anything.”

“Except my car.”

“Yeah. I killed your car. Sorry. Welcome home. How’s the book?”

The answer to her question scared me more than she did. I sat up. I tried to look her in the eyes. She saw me try and moved her focus to the morning sun rising over the tops of the maple trees.

“I couldn’t see it was you before I took out your windshield. I can’t see that far for detail.”

“How were you going to shoot straight at a little bird?”

“Shot guns are more forgiving than rifles.”

“Is that why you didn’t shoot me? The house?”

“The house?”

“You would have hit it.”

“No. I am a Quaker. I don’t shoot people.”

“Just cars.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry.”

I believed her.

The evening came and went. I told her what I found snooping around the house. She told me that she had loved me and had waited for me to come for my clothes. After a few days she concluded it was going to be a long wait. She asked about the book again.

“Is it about us?”

“I don’t know. It’s not finished.”

“Is it about me?”

“I think so.”

“Would you read me some?”

The first time she noticed she had a plan was the day she decided Tim had to go when the deck was finished. She put a one-man tent on it and realized he wouldn't sleep there that night. Once the thought passed into her mind it was certain.

The second time was the next day when she found Brandon who had his own tools in the back of his camper truck. He was eating cheap pizza by the slice, sitting at an outdoor table, the rain falling on and around him.

The third time came when she realized Brandon would only stay until the roof was on. That was the same day she met him eating pizza.

“It's about me.” She said.

Having done poorly assuming things about her in the past, I had to ask.

“Is that good or bad?”

“You can't know how weird it is to hear it said.”

“That's not good. Let me tell you why I left and why I came back. It's in here.” I pointed to my laptop. “Page 143.”

I found myself in her elaborate trap. Beauty is that way and hers for sure set my focus upon her to serve her for happiness' sake. Beauty is never enough to keep a wandering heart. Her method was catch and release but I, the poor game in her trap, would feed her and become her.

I was not really caught.

I left when I realized this as any prey would. I left though in love. Then, for my reasons, I set upon my return; to travel back to what she called home to find out if I had been wrong.

“Were you?”

“Too soon to tell. That’s as far as I have gotten.” I said. “I came back to be eaten I think.”

“I have never eaten anyone.”

“Yes, you have, or your house has.”

“Is that what your book says?”

“Maybe. Maybe I came back to find out how it ends if I stay.”

“Can you fix the plumbing?”

“Hire someone.”

“Does that mean you love me?”

“It means I want to be happy.”

“A happy wife makes a happy life.”

That night I started painting the house. The next day I was to roto-till the garden, plant seeds and fertilize.

Mornings have their lessons. Waking to find you're still alive is the first. It was high on my agenda to live through the first night back. It might have been paranoia, but I slept in the car in the backseat with the doors locked. As stupid as that sounds now, it didn't seem so then.

I have always sought love. I thought it was breasts and thin ankles— until it wasn't. Then I was lost.

I want to say I found her as I was seeking love, but no. She caught me in a weak moment. Writers are artists not self-made millionaires. *Hunger* is a novel about a writer struggling to live through a harsh winter. I needed help.

She has never said it, but she reached out to me thinking I was a handyman. Her plumbing was leaking. She needed a plumber.

It was not love to me or even physical attraction – unless one considers my attraction to her food.

She fed me and I tried to be a plumber. I gained weight and my impatience with the gymnastics of retrofit plumbing repairs shortened my temper.

This time – my return – was different.

At the moment of this realization, I learned she was curled up in the front seat, sleeping under a coat I had left behind. She had slithered in through the blown-out windshield, nestling herself quietly among the shards, without alerting me.

“Are you awake?” She asked.

I was surprised to hear her voice. “You still have secrets from me, don't you? I can feel so much of you behind a veil, silken, shining in the colors of your life, distractions that hide as much as I know of you or more.” I said.

“Are you trying to get me talking?” She said as she used her hand on the back rest of the front seat to pull her eyes up high enough to see me in the backseat.

““Shining colors of my life”? Maybe you mean rainbows through the shattered windshield glass.”

“What? You want to edit?”

“It’s about me. I should have a say.”

“I need more story from you. What you told me is cute and all, but it misses so much of you, it seems that I missed a lot of you is what I mean.”

“So, you came back for more of me, is that it?” she said. “That is what I hoped you would do. Novels have a lot of words and so far, we have only lived a short story is my guess.”

“Nothing wrong with a short story if you have a lot of them.”

“Is that me? What did you call it: ‘100 stories to build a three-story house’?”

“Maybe I came back for the house. My predecessors made me go because I was afraid to join them. Now I want to know them by being with them.” I said, which for all its honesty surprised me to say.

“The part you missed was not me as much as me with them, the men who built this house. True?”

“Yes. I want to be one, maybe the last one, maybe the one that dies here in his old age.”

Her eyes slid back down, and the hand disappeared. I laid there in the back, she in the front. The silence lasted long enough for me to fear she was only a dream. The fog the morning brought lay heavily around the car, the idea of dream and not reality laid thickly around my head. I could not look and fell asleep again.

For its part, the house stood three stories with a bedroom attached on one side of the mud room and a hallway leading to the dome. The bathrooms were on the ground floor – without a plumber that was all she could imagine.

For my part, on day two I examined the house, every place a human could go I went. I followed the plumbing going in and out. I tested windows for leaks and doors for squeaks. As I moved, I carried a box of needed items, ready at the sight of a weakness, ready to remedy the situation. I took the task as seriously as it has ever been taken.

Late in the day, something difficult to believe happened. I realized I had never gone onto the third floor. It was not hard to picture the second floor; it is a kid's room with a bed and drawers and toys of all description and no door out but the one at the top of the stairs going down.

I went outside, walked around the building as far as I could. The house is stuck into a wood of maples and oaks. Three quarters the way around was relatively easy but the wood out back made it difficult to gain a view of the top story above. From what I saw there was no external way up to it unless the trees were hiding it.

“Oh, well.”

I went back around to go inside. I went around the dome and away from the house and as I did, I looked through the third story window and saw it: inside, a ladder rising up against a wall.

And there it was inside the closet in the second story kid's room: a ladder to a hatch above. The rungs were doing the duty of shelf supports and had been hidden from me in my earlier inspections.

My skin tingled with anticipation. This was mysterious and maybe worth two thousand words. I ran to find her.

When I found her in the garden, she was tying up the tomatoes.

“Where are the children?”

“With their fathers in California.”

“Oh, yeah. You told me that.”

“Almost the first thing I said.” She said. “106, I have come to love you. You are gentle, kind, attentive. I’m reminded of a cool breeze against my skin.”

As we talked she moved down the rows, admiring each plant.

“Mmm. These’ll be tasty, make some good sauce.” She said

I like tomatoes, but not as much as she does. The last tomato harvest I lived at the house I made the sauce and paste. She ate tomatoes in everything. There is a sound, a sucking sound, a slurp that goes with eating tomatoes in the garden on a hot September day. My September thoughts found memories of the hammock I had missed seeing in my round about the house.

“Where is the hammock?”

“Gone into tatters and recycled or burned. A bit of each.” She stood as she talked and pointed over my shoulder to a box on the front porch. “Right after I killed your car, I ordered that on line. One day delivery.”

Like a child on an errand I ran over and unboxed a new hammock. I held it over my head like I had caught a giant salmon. I immediately took it to the trees I remember swinging under. Like a dream it all worked and in minutes, I was swaying under the maples with the sunlight filtering through.

As I swung, I mumbled the next words I would write.

The mystery was complicated. I had lived there for two years and all the while the third floor was there. I kept away from it. It kept away from me.

“How is the hammock ride? Good as you remember? How’s the book.”

“The third floor is haunted.”

“What? The third floor is not heated. You can live there if you wanted.”

“No, I mean it. It’s mysterious. Who built it? Why is there no way in?”

“Long story. We can talk about it later, when the sun is down. Its garden time.” She said as she went toward the house.

I must have been in a trance of some kind waiting for the truth to spill from her lips because I could not see the red hues in the sky until she said, ‘sun is down.’ The red sky and the look of rain reminded me to move the hammock in with me.

I went in through the dome door, since the mudroom was still full of winter gear leaving no room for the hammock. She had beaten me inside and was humming in the shower washing the signs of gardening from her hands and hair.

Dressed in her winter comfort clothes including wool socks she sat in an overstuffed chair in front of the woodstove staring out into the woods behind the house.

“Chilly for April,” She said.

I was sitting in the only chair I felt comfortable in. The main floor of the house was the original house surrounded by a L-shaped room and a bathroom. The original house had become the mud room and closets.

The large part of the L was the living area and the short side a kitchen. I sat at the table in a straight-backed chair. I could see most everything from there and I was near the food. I still had security issues.

“Are you going to tell me about the third floor?” I asked.

“I will but it’s a long story, too long for one night.”

“Can you tell me how it began? Was it like Tim and Brandon and the first house or Billie Nye and the dome?”

“Yes, no, no. It began as soon as the second floor was done.”

“Jim built that?”

“Carl. He is Dido’s father. Jim built the lower bedroom when I was carrying Sophie.”

“So Carl built the third floor?”

“No. That’s why it is a long story.”

“It sounds like a sad story.”

“It was a sad time that ended when you arrived.”

“Me? Why?”

“That’s the long story part.”

She went back to staring out into the dark woods and I went back to being insecure.

“What did I do for five years?” She asked. “I kept house and raised children. The rest was just details. I kept a journal.”

“Wow. I just realized that the third floor has been up for a dozen years and never used.”

“It’s a long story. I told you as much as I want to say today. Maybe more tomorrow. What did you do?”

“I wrote 150 pages of your book.”

“Ah. That story is too short for five years of writing. Did you travel?”

“Nothing but. No place became home. No one replaced you. I came back with a car. A new car. A Mercedes. I got lucky a few times and sold some writing. Three books, actually. They are in gas station books shelves.”

“You are a surprise.”

“That’s all you get from me until you tell me about the third floor.”

She turned back to staring out into the dark. The last signs of sunshine had long since disappeared from the woods. The only lights on in the house were the LEDs on the laptop sitting just in front of me on the table. When I noticed I placed a coaster over them. Then with no sources of light within, the rising moon cast maple tree shadows onto the floor.

The night’s sudden silence graced with moon beams settled my anxious mind. Our breathing, slow and relaxed grew to be the only sense we shared.

She fell asleep in her chair and I watched the moon shadows slowly cross her face until I no longer could hold my head up. I thought about sleeping at her feet. I went back to the Mercedes. It was cold.

In the morning I could not find her.

I looked in the dome.

I picked up the hammock to put it back up for what was looking like a sunny day.

She was not in the garden.

She and I had never thought we were especially telepathic together. There was no sense of hearing one another's thoughts before they are spoken. There was no sense of a 'deep connection' we could depend on in a crisis. I often felt we were bubbles floating in a still room, randomly encountering each other, maybe bumping but never converging. The disconnection was disconcerting at times.

Her shotgun was in its rack above the table. I stopped feeling nervous about her commitment to Quakerism.

I heard a noise above as I stared at her weapon and, below it, a new box of shells. Then I heard it again.

"She is in the kid's room." I said.

I started towards the stair then stopped. I returned to the table and to my seat to wait to see what would happen next.

The noises continued in random ways for most of the morning. I tried writing but words are hard to come by when waiting for someone. I was waiting for her to tell me another of her mysteries. As I listened to her shuffling above, as I waited for her to emerge and satisfy my need for inspiration, nothing came to mind.

I fell asleep with my fingers on the keys.

When I woke, it was the smell of coffee and bacon that entered my consciousness. Hunger, that ache accompanied by the anticipation of satisfaction floating in the air, is a sign of life.

It was then I heard her humming a slow ballad. Every few verses she knew a line or two.

"I am in love with a hmm, hmm, hmm."

She saw me stir. Her song ended and in seconds a cup of brown liquid with a splash of cream floating on top was placed within my reach. Her hand brushed my arm. A new ache appeared.

“Thank you.”

“You need a bed to sleep in.”

“There is the hammock.”

“Too lumpy for me. Too cold.”

When she tells a joke her throat constricts at the end producing a little chortle.

“I was waiting for you to come down.”

“Down?”

“From upstairs.”

“You hearing things upstairs?”

“Ah, come on. You’re still funning me.”

“Nah unh.”

“Then I was right. It’s haunted.”

“Nope, but now it is heated. It’s got a blowup bed and a space heater. I came down for sheets and blankets. It won’t be kind to your body for a few hours since it’s just forty-six last I looked. Tonight for sure.”

When I write I never stop making corrections. Nothing is ever perfect. Inspiration takes many forms, most often fragments. But every once in a while, words come in complete sentences, that make sense. When she said ‘tonight for sure,’ I heard a promise. I checked the laptop to find the battery had died so I had to remember my inspiration word for word until I could recharge enough to start the computer. Not much remained.

She broke my heart as easily as ...

Most of it was forgotten. There are moments when tears rise in your eyes. Maybe it's the Bambi complex or violins but your eyes mist over, maybe your chin quivers.

Tears ran down my cheeks.

The first weeks of spring passed rapidly, the unfurling of green proceeds until little of the muddy brown remains of early spring.

I finished painting the dome walls. The garden became a daily chore. She planted flowers and fertilized. Everyday life ensued. I wrote. She did whatever it was she did for the cost of living. Which, as I thought about it, was very little and exactly nothing I could remember.

The third floor became a place of amazement.

“Sophie is older than Dido. Jim before Carl. The short form is I have a syndrome of a kind. I loved them both but scared them away. I scared you too.”

“Why did Carl leave? Was it like Tim and Brandon?”

“That is one reason I started numbering men. They were starting to return with different names. But no, there was no Brandon this time. I built the third floor.”

“Carl did not want a third floor?”

“I told him he would not be the last and he left. Dido was very young. Sophie was only three. Life became difficult. I fed and housed more than a few people to help me finish that floor. It took most of five years.”

“Did you ever hope one would stay?”

“I had no lovers between Carl and you.”

“You sound sad. Let's stop for the night.” I rose from the table to start washing dishes. She moved to her chair. There was no fire. It was still light out. The maples were completely leafed out. It had rained earlier before dinner. The woods were a million tiny rainbows.

I had trouble figuring out where I should sleep. She is beautiful and in her ethnic way an alluring woman. She never let me choose to sleep with her in the dome. She never asked or invited me to join her. Not in any way I understood.

I would pick between the Mercedes or the third floor. The night she heated the third floor for me I slept there. It was lonely falling asleep but when I woke she was there with me. Bladders and bowels called as they will and when I came out of the bathroom she was cooking in the kitchen. Since then, I slept in the Mercedes.

When it didn't rain she would climb into the front seat. We talked in the mornings.

"This is not sustainable." I said when her hand appeared on the back of the front seats.

"No kidding. I think you are missing an important fact or two. I am missing something too but as luck would have it, I know where it is."

"Remember the wrench argument?"

"That's when you left."

"I heard you say our relationship would end."

"I was thinking about our parting by death not parting by choice."

"I missed that."

"You were upset about all the others, and you still are."

"That is true."

"The other fact you miss is that you belong here. This is your home."

"I am not at home here yet."

"You have never had a home. You are like no other."

"Let me think about that." I said. "Why did you build the third floor?"

"To trap you."

The Spring proceeded into June. White, and then brown and white, and in turn it became brown, green and blue. June would bring red and yellow. I had arrived on the midpoint between season changes. Summer was just weeks away.

I want to say that I saw what I now see, but I didn't. She was right. I struggled with the error in my vision. She was patient.

“Tell me more about the third floor.”

“Carl built most of the second floor. I was unhappy. One night I saw a third floor in a dream. Another someone would live there with me. It was good timing. Early summer. The roof was being built for the second floor and with a few changes the third story would fit right in. He asked why I wanted it and I told him the dream.”

“Unh. That hurts. What then?”

“He finished the second floor then left. We said goodbye. Why do we accept so much sorrow in our lives? I do not know.”

It was at that moment I saw her whole for the first time. We sat together in the Mercedes listening to the morning sounds. The early light brings the birds. Sun filtering through the trees brings insects. Sometimes a fog might rise out of the woods and settle on us. Not this morning. To my left was the house.

“Say, ‘This is my home.’” She said. “Please.”

“But ... OK. This is my home.”

Her hand appeared and then her eyes. There was a smile I could not see.

“Come in and I will feed you.”

I knew a day would come when I would surrender to reality and abandon my fears. The house still stood there as it had all along: haunted by the memories I could not

share. I would surrender my distance and submit to her again, not just to her beauty but also to her designs – the ones she had for me.

These designs, she might claim, I made for her to trap me as prey, as I wished, to be devoured for her nourishment. As this thought passed through me, I sighed a sigh of relief, a realization that my wandering could end. But just at that moment, the resistance began again.

“How’s the book?” She asked as she placed a plate of eggs and toast between me and the laptop.

“A ways to go. The story is taking a twist I hadn't expected.”

“How could that be?”

“I said it and when I did, I felt that it will be true if I said it often enough.”

“What?”

“This is my home. There. I said it again.” I wanted to be excited and lift her off the floor and carry her to the dome.

“Eat. I am going for a shower. You too, I hope.”

It is difficult to give up old ways, ways that define character or status. I was a solitary figure, a loner, who picked his own path through life. This self-description I would have to abandon to become her third-floor lover and the captive of her imagination. I wonder how I could have missed seeing surrender as the only option.

By the time she exited the shower I was lost in writing. She went out to the garden. When I went out to find her, she was muddy to her knees and naked, squatting in the garden planting radishes. Her long hair hung free the tips caked in mud.

“Things got out of hand here. I had a plan then I got flummoxed and now filthy again. Why do you have clothes on?”

Her question sounded innocent enough.

I heard her voice there in the garden asking me to touch the earth and enjoy the heat of the sun on my skin.

“Is this it then?” I asked her.

She was standing staring at me, her arms wide inviting me to touch her, hug her, anything but stand there frozen as I did. She stepped forward slowly and reached for my face with both hands.

“I hope so.”

My trance ended. I would say ‘we kissed’ but she kissed me, her muddy hands bringing the flavor of the soil to my nose. My hands reached for her hips.

I wanted to touch her, yet I could not. Seeing my resistance, she stepped closer until, I would guess, she felt the roughness of my clothes. Her hands moved to my shirt buttons and one by one she opened until she could pull it down and off my arms.

“You were right. Clothes are extra on a day like today.” I said.

“106. You are my man. I have thought a long time about this, and I can tell you now that you will stay. I will never tell you to go. This is our home.”

The next morning, I woke in the Mercedes, our new relationship, hungrily satisfied in the garden, had not taken me to the dome.

“106, neither of us has spooned since the last time we did. In the dome that last morning we spent together – I remember it as a moment of contentment. It only lasted a second or two before it ended. I miss moments like those. Remember?”

“I wish I could remember contentment. I remember that morning because it was our last. It is embedded in the sorrow I brought to us.”

Words separated us.

The morning brought a return to resistance yet again.

“If we are going to make this work it is going to take a lifetime.” She said. “I have an idea. Come inside and we can have breakfast in bed. Bring your laptop into the dome. I’ll cook. Coffee in fifteen. Don’t say no. Don’t say maybe. Say, ‘Only-est I will do as you ask.’”

“...”

“Say it.”

“Only-est I will do as you ask.”

She was out the windshield hole and off. I waited until she hollered “Coffee.” Then I walked to the dome.

The condemned man walks through the dusty street from the hole in the ground called a jail to the sturdy gallows where his life will be choked from him. I walked, my highly crafted self about to cross a threshold of no return from fearful fancier of romance to a captive stand-in for every man.

“Where does the money come from?”

“Chickens lay eggs. Spinach grows in the garden.”

“How about the bacon?”

“You want to know everything?”

“I do.”

The first summer we were back together I did not leave her side.

I had asked her about her income, and she told me it was a long story, a long and sad story.

“The third-floor story wasn’t so long.”

“I didn’t tell you everything.”

When she said she had secrets still, it was the first real truth I could grasp onto. She was right: The book itself would never end. It had become a journal of our day-to-day life with little to recommend it for mystery except the ending which will need another author to complete with the information of the death of the last of us.

I stopped writing. I also stopped sitting in my chair at the table.

We moved into the third-floor room. With the new stair in the closet, we moved a futon up – a new one – and some of the things required by the setting. Two floors from a piss pot may be a floor or two too many. Amazon, she found, purveyed portable pissoirs.

The first night we spent in our room was a special night.

“This is our room?”

“Yes, I built this for us. Not a single Ex was involved. This is my dream come true.”

“Haunted only by you.”

It was not so simple to change, as I soon found out. Writers often are driven by an inner being who demands time to spin a tale as if the spinning was the point, the spinning being akin to flights of fancy, sailing seas, conquering space, solving time's great mysteries. That's not easy to give up once you know it's there.

"Imagination is a gift, 106. You have it. It will not let you live in peace, as your muse, I know this. So, get to work." She was a wiser woman, than I a man.

"The story is stuck in the present. I could say they lived happily ever after and be done."

"It's too short."

"It is not finished. It has no end."

"Years ago, you said you had a trick."

"I did? Oh yeah, I did." I said. "Wonder what I could have meant?"

"The book is a dialogue between a man and a woman. You fashioned them after the two of us. But they are not us. They have lives of their own. True?"

She was holding my hands. I was sitting in her chair by the fire. Summer had gone. The tomatoes had been canned. The first cold rains made us make the first fire of fall and take the first day of rest. She had come to kneel by me as I slumped in her chair with chaos on my face.

"Maybe the book needs more characters." I said.

"How about a couple of children. They are coming back for a visit. Their fathers are driving them out."

"Their fathers are Jim and Carl. They are driving together?"

"Yes."

"I didn't know they knew each other."

"As you'll see they are very good friends."

"Hmmm. That's worth five thousand words."

I waited because I had no choice. This time of year, when it rains in between bouts of sunshine it is easy to be over dressed and sweat if you are too cautious or soaking wet if you are too callous. A month ago, I would not dress at all until the sunset brought the cool breezes. This time of year, when the cold is back, clothes are essential.

That day I was incautious, and on my walk down the driveway to the mailbox on the road, the rainstorm from hell poured a river onto me in a five second interval and then nothing.

“I hate that.” I said as I continued to the mailbox now on a muddy trail.

Returning I walked through the woods following a path below the back of the house. Bored with home and anticipation that new characters were on their way for me to inspect, I dilly dallied. The Bricktop mushrooms caught my attention, and I began a search for as many as I could find.

They had arrived before I got back to the house.

The two men were standing by their car. She was laughing. The children were nowhere to be seen. As I approached the tall one, Jim, pointed at the Mercedes, which now had the remnants of thyme and rosemary plants poking through the windshield hole that she had determined would settle the karma down a little.

“Nice car. It came to a good end.” Then he slapped his knee as if he was telling a joke and I should laugh.

“You are Jim? Nice to meet you. The car is yours cheap if you want it.” I tried to be jovial. I had not settled on how I would introduce myself, but I saw it was unnecessary.

She came over and put her arm through mine. I looked at Carl to see if he was caring about her affections. When he saw her near me, he went over to Jim and kissed his cheek.

“Look, honey, she has a new one.” Carl said.

Jim laughed and kissed him back while she held me tighter still.

“106, they love each other.”

“We are married. Would have invited you but we eloped to New Mexico.” Jim said while running his fingers through Carl’s hair.

Gay? She had not told me though she must have known.

“You guys stay in the dome tonight. The kids in their rooms. When you go, we will move Sophie’s things into the dome and put Dido’s in the first-floor bedroom. By the time they come to stay next year they will have new rooms. Where are they?”

The girls were 13 and 15. They were dressed in street shoes, white socks and frilly ‘Easter’ dresses. When their car came to a stop next to the Mercedes they leapt out and ran for the trail head into the woods. As she asked about them, their squeals could be heard until Dido began to scream and curse her older sister.

“Asshole! You put mud in my hair.”

“You threw some at me and don’t call me that. You little ...”

Carl ran to the sounds which on his arrival quieted, until laughter once more was heard.

That night I sat at the laptop now safely situated on the third floor. She laid on the bed half asleep. The guys brought wine and some cannabis they had grown. Both were experienced growers and their crop was medicinal. She enjoyed it. I had a cup of coffee to keep my senses sharp. She groaned as she turned over.

“Come to bed. You can write in the morning. I am cold.”

Confusion is a disease. There is a cure, at least in theory.

“Jim, I have a personal question.” I said.

“106, we didn’t mean to fall in love, but we did and now that we have settled that there was no confusion.”

“You read my mind.”

“There are many people, like you who know our pasts and wonder at us being married, in love and with two children with the same mother. On the surface it seems impossible or at least very improbable but here we are. It was not as complicated as all that.”

“Pretty please.”

“Pretty please? Who can ignore that?”

By the time I returned from the bathroom she was asleep. I thought about the laptop. I looked at her face in slumber, a smile still visible. Carl had said, “You can’t help who you fall in love with.” I smiled in agreement and eased myself under the blankets and up against her back, my arm over her waist, just the way she likes.

She was never very open about herself. She told me she had secrets and if I asked her to tell me one she would. But never would she talk about herself the way I talked about myself.

“I was raised a Presbyterian.” She said. “But by the time I came to this place I was a Quaker.”

“Didn’t they hang each other regularly during the 17th century?”

“Puritans not Presbyterians.” She said.

“Alliteration, at least.”

“Small conciliation for being wrong.”

“What did I do?”

“Tried to be cute.”

“Sorry.”

“Want to hear another one? It might scare you.”

“Wait. Fear is not my favorite. Tell me one that will make me laugh.”

“No. Secrets between lovers are always fearful or sad.”

“I must have a secret. Something funny.”

“If it’s funny it doesn’t qualify as a secret.”

“Then becoming a Quaker doesn’t qualify.”

“You knew I was a Quaker. The secret is that I am fickle.”

“That might not be a secret – nor currently true.”

“No. It is true. It is part of me. 106, I had affections before you.”

“That scares me even though it is not a secret.”

I knew a crisis was coming. The book was dragging on as we attempted to reveal our inner beings to one another. Nothing like that would survive on the market without sordid scenes or a life-threatening crisis leading to a climax and a denouement.

It bothered me to contemplate how I might save this book from its author. On the one hand I was its author. My hands created the record of the words that flowed through my mind. On the other hand, I didn't know where the words came from. I looked at any suspect source with suspicion.

The latest writing in the book had taken a different tact than the early one. At first it was the two of us or my memories of our time together before I left. At least to my eye it was a version of us, but now the characters began to talk for themselves beyond the limits of my memory.

I woke every day on the third floor with her odor in my nose. She rises early to garden and to massage her house. I rise to sit at the desk on the third floor to write an ending to the book.

She knew when things needed to be planted and when they needed to be harvested. I watched her singing in Gaelic as she planted garlic on the October full moon. It was cold, but she was naked. The Moon painted her with yellow light. I could feel her goose bumps.

"Shall we have a child?" I asked her later.

"We have two."

"Three is a nice number."

"106. I would have your child, but I would rather not. Besides, I see you in there behind your eyes, remembering the photo album with Jim and Carl and you. Do you still feel less special?"

"Maybe. Maybe I just wanted to bring it up to hear how it sounded to me."

"How about a puppy. Maybe you need a constant companion. Someone to sit at your feet."

“How about a parakeet?”

“They’re too messy.”

We never had that conversation. It’s in the book like a mile marker, an arrow pointing to a roadside attraction. It tells me where the paths parted.

“How is the book?”

“I am doubting today. I doubt it has an end.” I said. Doubt is like confusion. I had no way to control it. Certainty is not available in easy-to-swallow capsules available at stores everywhere.

“Writing is sounding dangerous. Maybe you should see someone.”

“For what?”

“Peace of mind. Happiness. Contentment. See someone who cares about artists, who knows the blind alleys, the back roads in your mind.”

“I wrote that line.”

“I was there.”

“When are you going to tell me where your money comes from?”

“Creative answer number one: I print it when I need it. Better yet: It’s a long, sad story.”

“A question?”

“OK.”

“Are you hiding from something? Your past, perhaps.”

“106, we are all hiding from the gaze of the unserious admirer.”

“We don’t intend to hide?”

“We have little choice.”

She smiled. The book could end before she told me and by then it wouldn't matter. It never mattered, and as she said, “We hide from each other partly for fun and partly because we don't know any better.”

Carl and Jim stayed for several weeks. The kids, back in their old rooms with their old toys, hummed in the warmth of the house. Meals became extravaganzas, long and often raucous.

I worked at writing in my room, thinking fiercely about the scene I might not see below me. She, the girls and the fathers loved laughing together and they would until late when she came upstairs, settled down from tucking in the kids.

“Aren’t you lonely up here?”

“All in the service of art.”

“They all like you, you know.”

“I just have different needs. I am unhappy and nervous at times until I sit and write then it goes away.”

“Have you ever thought you might be a bit complicated?”

One day they all left. She and I stood in the middle of the driveway watching their car go out of sight as the trail turned before meeting the road.

The first days were quiet. Then a big change. Winter began early. The garden buried under snow. Time was increasingly dark. With the darkness came bodily rest and as the Solstice neared the inescapable anxiety of death rose to its height.

“Maybe we should go to Florida for a while.”

“Maybe you should fix the Mercedes for the road and drive.”

“A road trip? What a cool idea.” I closed the laptop and began to search for its case.

“You are excited about going. We have a few things to do before we can leave.” She said. “The chickens for one.”

The Mercedes took a week to bring back to life. Her buckshot had taken the front tires and the cooling system out of commission. When it was started after those repairs, the muffler was also found to have half dozen holes.

We took two days to pack.

“Look if we ever find our way to the heat, we will need swim suits. Bring them or buy them?”

“I have the laptop and a pair of loafers. I have a pair of pants with zippers to make shorts. I have a fancy pair of underpants that looks like a suit including a fake pocket in the back. I have all that on plus two shirts. I need sunglasses and I am ready to go.”

“Gawd. What about sleeping bags and a tent?”

“What about motels?”

“What about road food?”

“Road food? Might save us time. No apples please. They smell after a few days. No chips or crackers either.”

“You have a bunch of rules.”

“The Mercedes is mine, my prior home. It has its own rules. OK?”

“106. I am your loyal friend and servant. How about swim fins?”

“Not for me. What about room for hitchhikers?”

“Maybe I should bring my stash? Maybe we should go through California and visit the kids.”

“Maybe we will never get to Florida. California has its beauties.”

“Yah, but Florida is endangered.”

“See it now before the Atlantic takes it back. Don’t be the only one who never saw the gorgeous coast lines and the miles of sand beaches.”

“Exactly.”

“We’ll never get there ...”

“... If we do not leave.”

She put her hand on mine. My hand was on the steering wheel. We were buckled in, geared up and ready to go.

“I’ll miss the house.” She said. “Let’s go.”

The adventure began with the roar of the Mercedes’ amazingly engineered and powerful engine. I had not left the house and its meadows and woods since early April when the Mercedes brought me back to the house. I had forgotten the call of the road and the smoothness and comfort of the temperature-controlled seats.

“Nice car.” She said. “It looked good in the yard: A still-life creation of German engineering and backwoods hippie insanity. I have a theory. For something to be fun there must be a little craziness in it otherwise it’s fascism.”

“No comment.”

“Do you like poetry?”

“I never read it. No, that’s not true. I read it when I find it. I don’t find it so much as I used to. When I read it, I liked it.”

“How?”

“Funny question. How did I like it? I liked it plain spoken, revealing my own sense of beauty to myself.”

“Have you ever tried to write poetry?”

“I smile at your question?”

“Like Buddha?”

“Like 106.”

“So, oh Great 106, how was your experience at writing poetry?”

“I studied number theory in college. I studied the recognition of patterns. Those were heady days. Poetry was patterns, until eec came my way it was counting and rhymes.”

“Eec?”

“Cummings without meter or rhyme, just sense in a physical way. The page arranged by lines of varying length, beginning in a non-mathematical place.”

“Rebellion!”

“Freedom!”

“Road food makes communal life difficult.”

“106, you have a way of putting things. The house is beginning to beckon to me.”

“Wow. This is day one and we are still in Michigan.” I said. She did look funny sitting in the bucket seat she used to sleep in. Funnier, this was the first time we had been in a moving car together.

“Do you have a driver’s license?”

“No. Never had one.” She said.

“You don’t vote.”

“No. Why? Are you investigating my past?”

“Maybe. Truth is I do not know your name. I need a word, a word for you, a term not a pronoun. You have no name in the book.”

“I noticed. I thought, ‘he will never make it this far,’ but you did.”

“The old way is to wait to learn the name by finding a relationship. I stayed on an Indian rez for a few years. They called me one-beer or always-going.”

“Says a lot about you. Always going to get a beer. So, what about me?”

“Hmmm. Maybe something will turn up before we get to Indiana.”

“Or Sarasota.”

“I could be Wendy and you Peter.”

“Peter Pan?”

“Sounds good to me, Peter. ‘106’ worked. It’s cute and cuddly, but ‘Peter’ sounds better. Let’s try it.”

“Look, Wendy, we are in Indiana. Where are we headed?”

“Well, Peter, I think we are becoming ever more entwined. I like it.”

“Entwined? Is that a state of mind or a mess on the floor?”

“You think this name stuff is working? Not me. 106 is a number. It means your thoughts create your environment. That is who you are.” She said. “I may be Wendy, but you, dear 106, are not ‘Peter.’”

“Well my dear friend Wendy, I propose we head for the heat. Straight line it’s less than a day’s ride from here.”

“106, you are a seductive talker. I’ll sleep for an hour and spell you.”

“Sarasota here we come!”

The road trip took a turn for the worst when we were only 25 miles into Indiana near Goshen. I had no idea that Wendy had a hidden agenda but there it was, undeniable.

“Peter, with all this time to think, big thoughts are passing through.”

“Like what?”

“Mexico, for one.”

“Mexico’s big.”

“Yes, it is.”

Road trips can be terrible when the hours turn into hours that feel like days, when boredom enters just as conversational topics diminish. Alone, you sing or tell yourself things out loud that you wish other people would tell you.

“Wendy, I want to tell you a secret.”

“Wait. Not yet.”

“But it is important to me that you know. I am not a US citizen.”

“You are here illegally? Oh, so Mexico is out of the question for you? Got it.”

“Not illegally. I prefer extra-legal myself.”

“Oh, a diplomatic passport? Working for a foreign power. Wow!”

“My job was to infiltrate Leelanau County and discover the whereabouts of several suspects in an international criminal syndicate.”

“That’s how you found me. I was infiltrated. Now my sinister plan is over. I captured he, who would capture me. Now, I get it.” She said.

The road ahead was the easy way to get to Sarasota.

“Keep going south until you hit the big water, turn left and you’re there.”

“Does that mean head to Louisiana until we see a sign to Florida?”

“Correct.”

“If we sleep and drive three hours off and three hours on, we will get there before sunset on Christmas.”

“Christmas?”

“It’s a federal holiday. Almost everything will be closed.”

“I want to go home.” She said. “I’m feeling trapped.”

“Wendy, my trap has been used many times. I am the bait. You are now hooked. We have only to reel you in.”

“Why did you tell me this secret? Is it just for the plot?”

“Your thieving days are over, Wendy. For now, keep driving to Sarasota. I’ll pass you off to my SO and go get the rest of your gang.”

I had her and she knew it. This was not my first experience of finding and trapping my prey. My Supervising Officer, really the guy I worked for in the FBI, had a number of contractors. He told me ten at a time. I believed him. Imagine ten people like me out undercover, in the dark, seeking international criminal syndicate masterminds. His life must be very exciting.

As for Wendy, she asked for whatever she would get. I had seen her file. I knew what she was capable of. I had spent two years with her before I was called to another job. Never did I see any evidence that she was a criminal. That is how smooth an operator she is.

“Sarasota, here we come.” She said.

“I’m glad you changed your mind about Mexico. I’ll nap.”

Bob and Chuck could give a hot damn about anybody. They rode the highway, listening to the scanners, hoping to get to an accident scene before the police.

“One a week a-hole and we have our nut. Two and we have a party.”

“Girls and all? Whiskey and steak?” Chuck said.

“You betcha.”

“A 452 southwest of Galen insect with Road 5 and Christalmighty Rd.” The scanner announced.

“That’s just five minutes from here. We got it.”

“Yee-ha. Party time comin’ up.”

Bob loved speeding to a scene more than anything. He could feel the rush of opportunity rise in his face.

“Chuck, remember to stay clear of the blood at the scene. That’s a fingerprint and maybe AIDS.” Bob said.

“Don’t get involved. In and out.” Chuck said. “I got it. No blood. One more thing to remember.”

“Stay focused and all will be well.”

They neared the scene. The scanner predicted police in five minutes. Bob stayed in the car idling, keeping the AC going and listening to Pink Floyd. Chuck jumped from the red Subaru, ran down the embankment and back up in three minutes.

“Fast. We are out here.” Said Bob. “What you get?”

“A wallet, a purse and a watch. Nice one.”

Bob drove away from the advancing police vehicle. “Money. Count the money.”

“Jackpot. Big bills and a lot of them.”

“I told you the roads to the casinos are the ones to watch.”

Bob smiled as he let the miles and minutes pass. Chuck counted and counted, mumbling to himself which no one could hear over the Pink Floyd.

"Live for today, gone tomorrow, that's me, HaHaHaaaaaa!"

Only one thing was louder.

"Unit 65 at the 451. Two bodies both code 3. No ID. Suspected 225."

"Whoa, they know someone got there first." Chuck said. "Were they dead?"

"No. Just so drunk they thought I was helping them. He was half dressed. They got distracted and ran off the road probably."

"Scanner said both were code 3. Called them bodies."

"Must have been another wreck."

"We just can't keep up."

The road just gets longer as one drives away from home. I was thinking that when the alarm went off and it was my turn to drive.

“Pull over Wendy. It’s my turn.”

“Sure, why not.” She said.

As the car came to a stop behind a parked car on Hwy 62 outside the first town across the Kentucky border, I noticed how tense she had become. The agent SO kept telling me not to underestimate her. She had been in deep cover for too long, SO said. She is smooth.

“Peter. I was thinking while you slept that you might reconsider your conclusion that I am your prey. An international criminal syndicate seems a bit out of my league. Crime is out of my experience.”

“Wendy, you are smooth and well-trained. I have to give it to you.”

“106, you know I love you, I can keep driving. I feel great and driving helps the hours pass.”

“OK. I’ll keep you company. Have you ever been to Sarasota?”

“Never. Come to think of it, no one has ever told me anything about Sarasota except in sentences saying something like, ‘passing through Sarasota’ or ‘50 miles outside Sarasota...’.” She said.

“Well, we’re just passing by in about 12 hours.” I said. “If we stop for food, we might be able to check a map, maybe get internet.”

“Passing by?”

“Yeah, the place we are going is northwest of Sarasota. We don’t even have to see Sarasota. It takes the same time to get to where we are going as it does to reach the city.”

She drove for hours, never nodding or swerving. I told her about my misspent youth trying to play music, then athletics, then science until I settled on starving artist, a writer, a novelist who would tell the stories of our time.

The hours lay heavily upon us as we passed Birmingham.

“Serious. It’s my turn,” I said as she stared over the steering wheel that her bloodless hands gripped tightly.

“Who are you?” she said.

“A good question, but an inappropriate setting. Please pull over, so you can sleep and I can drive.”

“Oh, it’s you, my man. Whoa, big pony, whoa.”

The snow was slick and she slid a little as she came to a stop.

“Love these brakes. Mercedes builds The Car. No?”

“Lie down. Sleep. It’s Christmas Eve.”

Bob and Chuck kept heading north towards Sarasota.

“We have an ID on the weapon used. It is a 38 mm Walther. Registered to the Smith, Randall L, registered owner of the car.”

“Wow those people were shot with their own weapon.” Bob said. “Chuck, to our list of do’s and don’ts, please add - don’t do that. OK?”

“Maybe we need more time. If you rush me, I take short cuts.”

“Chuck, you are my brother. I will be more careful in the future.”

“The final count is \$2,232. A watch worth \$50 and a necklace worth \$250, nothing fancy. The grand total is about \$2,500. Party time.”

“Where should we go? Georgia is too far. We can’t go back to Cape Coral.” Bob said.

“I know a place not an hour from here. Has all the amenities. Drive on through Sarasota.”

“We have an APB for a vehicle described as a late model sedan heading towards Sarasota on highway 301.” The scanner said.

“They are closing in. Uh-uh. They know nothing.”

“Then why are they showing it?” Chuck said.

“People don’t know anything. They are chasing someone. They tell everyone who listens. A PR campaign I guess, for the rubes, for the niggahs. ‘You are still safe. Remain calm.’” Bob said.

“Bob, I don’t mind telling you that you are one propagandized bitch, dude.”

“Remember when you used to come to me and beg money for candy?”

“Last week?”

“OK. I don’t want to swear, but you are making me, and it hurts.”

“Save your juice. I am trying to make you laugh. My bad.”

Bob drove his 2007 red Subaru WRX into Sarasota.

“Bro, I have come to a conclusion.”

“Ooh! That must have felt good.”

“It did, in a way. Chuck, this is not the life. We have been driving since before breakfast because we had no money for breakfast, just gas. Six hours, we score. We are on the run. Heading away from our crib, looking for a drunken party and tomorrow it starts all over again. Do you feel me?”

“I hate it when you say that.”

“Cliché not touché.”

“Bob, I know you think you are speaking French, but you aren’t.”

They rode in silence through Sarasota, neither paying attention to the passing strip mall parking lots. Chuck looked at his older brother, hoping for something. He gestured as if he was about to talk, but nothing came out. He, Bob, sat still at a stop light, looking straight ahead, his breath a low snort, the muscles in his face speaking about daggers.

Chuck began to gesture again.

“Don’t.” Bob said, his right hand off the wheel pointed at Chuck’s side of the car.

Chuck didn’t. Ten minutes passed as they drove.

Bob looked the same. Chuck offered a tiny gesture with his left hand.

“What, damn it? It better be good.”

“Bob, we passed the turn.”

I turned right onto Hwy 64. The black Mercedes had performed well for having been shot dead not nine months ago. The cornering Mercedes hugged the turn and sped along the narrow road toward Anna Marie Island.

“Now where do we go?” Wendy said.

“We head to the water and turn right. A couple of miles and we can find a restaurant and settle in.”

“I miss our cooking, but I am not going to miss cooking. How long should we stay?”

“First melt and the garden will call.”

“March.”

“There are costs involved in this.”

“106, I am a blogger. I write for gardening sites under twelve different names. I write about tomatoes, mostly.”

So, it turned out we were both bloggers. She hid her work from me. I couldn't find anyone interested in mine.

“Me, too.” I said.

“Oh, yeah?”

“I write about Endtime strategies for investors.”

“Too nihilistic.”

“Not even possible. There is only nihilism. There is no left-wing nihilism.”

“I meant too much nihilism.”

“You want manic depression instead? Some split, maybe multiple, personalities.?”

“You talking Grrr-Meow? No, I want flowers in a garden and peace in the news. I want passion. Anger is so un-wonderful. I am against it in a loving way, not anger for anger, but turning anger aside with a smile, an invitation for passion.”

“A man is different. Passion after action. Flowers are for funerals.”

“And weddings.”

“Weddings?”

“Would you like flowers at our wedding?”

“I would prefer passion before our wedding.”

“Are you angry.”

“Very.”

“I will smile for you if you will be passionate for me.”

“It’s a deal.” I said. “First the restaurant?”

A lone biker turned the corner from 301 North onto 64 West. The Harley purred over the sound of passing cars and the mild breeze rustling the palm leaves.

“Biggie, you’ve got it going on.” He screamed into the Florida sun. His open shirt flowed with the moving air as he turned west toward the Gulf. Biggie, his nickname for himself, masked his reality. The bike was big. He was a car thief who made it boosting a black Mercedes which he happily discovered had five pounds of white powder in the trunk.

Biggie wanted to be a hoodlum ever since he saw his first drive-by shooting outside his auntie’s East Oakland, California home. Biggie, or Leonardo as his mother named him, saw other shootings. The first one impressed his young mind with the power of death. There was this guy who had been harassing Biggie and his running mates to sell product in the parks. The three of them ran whenever they saw him, but he eventually pressured them into dealing anyway. In time they were his boys. Leonardo watched as the guy stood on the curb waiting for customers to roll up. The play was to wait until the guy took the money then one of the boys would go to the car window and drop the product into the car.

First thing in the morning, the guy would stand in front of Biggie’s. He could wait for as long as it took until the three boys were in his car to go to the site for sales. One day Biggie looked out the window to see if the guy was there, the guy was there. As Biggie watched the guy a car came up behind him. There were flashes of light, then sounds echoed in between buildings as the guy went down in a twitching heap.

The bike purred, and Biggie purred. They purred right up behind a black Mercedes, just like the Mercedes Biggie scored so well on. This one had Michigan plates.

Biggie didn’t give a shit about anybody. Nobody cared about him, except the poor Cuban mother fucker who lost the blow. Biggie spent a few moments thinking about the Cuban. Sarasota is not the mafia capital of Florida, but the Cuban might have been visiting from Miami, say. That might make him a bad ass instead of a country bumpkin with a big dream or a bad job muling snow in this heat.

“No way to find me. No prints. Car’s in a creek burned to a crisp. Blow is gone to Cuz who handles found objects and lost white powders.” He said to himself, his voice lost in the bike’s sounds and motions.

The Cuban didn’t hear him. The Cuban couldn’t hear him: The Cuban existed only in Biggie’s imagination. The MF’er who lost the blow was an FBI agent setting up a sting. Biggie was being followed on his way to see Cuz. Cuz was fuzzed and Cuz was pissed, plotting Biggie’s end. Cuz didn’t know anything about a Cuban. He just knew about the FBI.

“How is the book?”

“Well, life in Florida is too much for me.” I said. “Everyone I see is a wacko or a felon.”

“106, stop looking and start playing. We’ve tossed away our peaceful home life for an adventure in a land time will swallow. Whatever we do here will disappear for a millennium. Somehow that is comforting.”

“We have two months or more. What are you going to do? Write about tomato propagation?”

“Yeah! That’s the spirit. A little ironic. But I like it.” Wendy said. “I was thinking about going wild.”

“You mean bringing men home.”

“106, what is aching you? You are my man. I love you.”

“Wendy, I am not a good traveler. We have been in the Pirate Cove Inn for ten minutes. My fish burger with a side of slaw has not arrived. I am hungry for food, for a chance to write, for your attention and a dozen other things that are not available in cars, such as horizontal sleep.”

“You’ve lost your sense of humor?”

“Yes, what’s worse, is that there is a myriad of things I want to lose.”

“Like your fat head.”

The conversation had taken a turn for the worse. She has a way of going from happy to sad and that distance attracts me to her. Her sorrows are my chores. I wandered until I met her and though we spent five years apart I did not wander from her, but back to her again.

“OK. What do you want to do with our two months in the sunny state of Florida?”

“I want to party big time.”

“I am sorry Wendy, but you will have to settle for a Big Mac and a night in a cheap motel.”

“Peter. Don’t you get that you have the wrong person, that I am a gardener with malice toward none?”

“No. The trail led to you. My report will become part of the record. The FBI will pick it up from here. We just have to chill for 24 hours until they wake up from vacation.”

“It’s Christmas. I was hoping for affection and somehow your imagination has led you to delusional thinking.”

“Save it.”

“But we are lovers and friends.”

“I am a consultant for deep cover captures of Class I Felons of which you are one.”

“So, I am the so-called international criminal syndicate leader?”

“Yes.” I said.

“Is that why we have to have a shitty time in paradise?” she said.

I could see the wheels turning.

“Alright. I have nothing to do but keep you company. We don’t have to suffer. I don’t know this area at all. Do you?”

“Go to the water, turn right. Two miles on the left. Pirate Cove Inn.”

“Wendy, you are a wonder. How’s the menu?”

“Tropical and Cuban. Tons of special drinks. I was a waitress there for a year or two back when.”

“I don’t drink much but do what you want.”

“It took me so long to capture you I am not about to flee now, even if you are paranoid. I love you, Peter.” She said.

Why not humor her? The SO expected me to call periodically. He knew I was on my way to Florida with her. I was to get as much of a confession from her as I could without any rough stuff. The SO had no idea where we were or where we were going. I was told to hole up near Sarasota and he'd contact me for the transfer.

“I love you, 106.”

“I love you.”

“Let’s just have fun.”

“Fuck Cubans. Party here I come.” Biggie yelled at 40 mph, running about two miles past the 64 turn to the north. “Pirate Cove Inn. Check it out. Home.”

Biggie didn't bother to look around him; Biggie was busy finding parking for the bike.

The two sedans that had been following him since the turn off from 301. They all pulled into the Pirate Cove parking area. The red Subaru parked under a tree.

“Bob, only a fool parks under a tree. Your ride will be a compost heap by the time we emerge again.” Chuck said.

“You're not very smart are you, Chuck. If I park in the shade the car will not be a pre-heated toaster when we get back in.”

The other sedan, some gray fleet car with Maryland plates, parked next to a Black Mercedes with Michigan plates. If Biggie had been paying half attention, he might have avoided what was to come.

“Hey, look at that bike, dude.” Chuck said.

Bob had heard this repeatedly, for the last week, as the bikers began to return to Sarasota.

“Make your move. Don't call me 'dude'. And one more thing that pissed me off, but, ummm, sorry. Oops, my bad. Forgot what I was going to say.”

“Won't listen anyway, A-hole. Is that better?”

“I hate 'dude,' Dude.”

“Let's get the party started.”

As Bob and Chuck exited the car, the driver of the gray sedan, dressed in a gray suit with black city shoes, pulled open the door to the Pirate Cove Inn. Bob and Chuck could have cared less.

“Rum, rum and more rum.” Chuck said when Bob asked him why he was in such a hurry.

“Maybe there is a better place than this. It is a bit stuffy looking for my tastes.”

“Bob, I like it.”

“Seating for three,” the waiter asked.

“No, I am alone,” said the man in the suit.

“Two and one then.”

“We’ll sit at the bar.”

“Not me I want a table,” Chuck said.

“Two and one. Follow me please.” The man in the suit followed.

Bob and Chuck stood at the door.

“What?” Chuck said.

“I like the bar. Can we sit in the bar? Women who would want me live in bars. I want one of them.”

“Bob, over time you might find that once we can afford the fine things in life you will come to enjoy them. The bar.”

Biggie walked into the bar behind Chuck and Bob. He scanned the seating and found his seat, went to it and sat down at a table.

Chuck went directly to the bar.

“Rum and coke. What do you want Bob?”

“Same.”

“Make it two.”

The Cuban looking bartender had no other customers except the three men. After delivering the two drinks, he left the bar for Biggie’s two-person table with a clear view of both the entrance and the restaurant section of the Pirates Cove Inn.

“Mountain Dew with Canadian Mist.” Biggie said.

“How about a 7 and 7, on the rocks.”

“Are you a Cuban?”

“No, are you having a 7 and 7?”

“Let me think about it. Have a menu?”

“Sure. Here.”

“Why can't I have a Mountain Dew with Canadian Mist?”

“We don't have those brands, but it is a whiskey and soda and so is a 7 and 7, which was the favorite drink of my now late dear auntie who raised me when my parents were sent to prison for life,” the waiter said.

“For what?”

“It's in the past and best forgotten. So, forget it.”

“I'll have a Budweiser, tall bottle. Do you have tacos.”

“Fish.”

“I'll have two with a side of beans.”

“Of course, Sir.”

Biggie had never managed to successfully order in a restaurant before. He thought he might be learning how to be who he wanted to become: suave and cool, just dancing to the music inside his head, a slow dance with flashing skirts, twirling in the chiaroscuro of a bar like the Pirate Cove Inn.

He had arrived. He scanned the bar and the two guys arguing over everything.

He looked at the restaurant seating with a 30 something couple trying to have a good time and a single guy in a suit with a clear view of the bar and the entrance.

Over in the far corner was another 30ish couple. The male partner was gesturing toward the single man in the gray suit. Biggie didn't miss that.

The waitress delivered their food and left.

“Getting a few people in. I like people watching. When you look around at them who do you see?”

“Really? You want to know how paranoid a guy can be?”

“106, I love you dearly. Let ‘er rip.”

“There are nine people. Three customers and the bartender in the bar; not counting us, there are three customers in the restaurant, and a waitress. There must be kitchen staff, but I can’t see them. Every one of the customers is dangerous. Four are armed. There is one pair of lovers with a big decision to make.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“I am trying to decide whether anyone is following anyone else. For instance, the ...”

“Can I get you folks another rum and coke?” The bartender asked.

“Me, yes,” Wendy said.

“Peter, I want a pina colada. I want steak and lobster.”

“Order it. Might be your last meal as a free woman. See the single man who just sat across the room. Over there.” I said.

She turned and scanned the room. Her eyes settled on my SO.

“Gray suit.”

“Yes. He is my SO. He gestured me to ignore him.”

“Peter, I understand your complete commitment to justice. You aren’t who I thought you were, but I can live with a few of your blanks filled in. You remain mysterious to me. I am not offended by your believing I am a felonious villain. Actually, that’s sort of sexy. You know what I mean?”

“Wendy, when you blew out my windshield with your shotgun, I knew who you were.”

“Peter, let me do a little out-loud-style thinking. Your SO... He’s the one you report to... Your SO is sitting there. You arranged to meet him tomorrow to turn me over, but he is here now, a day early. Remember he didn’t know where we were headed, so this is a coincidence. He is here for other reasons that would be compromised by showing himself to the people in this room.”

“That’s one idea. Maybe he is testing me so that he can have dinner on Christmas in peace instead of being postponed while he booked you into the local jail.”

“No reason to get excited. I have no sympathies for him, but I understand that you are a good follower and would give him that deference.”

“I don’t take the insult you are sending.”

“No insult. Just my truth.” Wendy said.

“Come on 106. Let’s find a room. You can write. I can sleep.”

“Good idea. One more rum and coke for you and driving would be impossible.”

“You drive. Two doors down is the Gulfview. We could stay there.”

“This could be fun. I changed my mind. It is very stimulating, all these people.”

“The power of rum and sun. I see the sand and a cheap novel in my future.”

“I definitely see a cheap novel.” I said.

After the beer and taco Biggie was happier. The 30 something couple in the middle of the restaurant section left. Biggie was not a sentimental person, so he would not miss them. They looked a bit Michigander for his clothing tastes.

He moved to the bar, checked his cell for the time and causally took pictures of all the inhabitants of the restaurant. He then emailed them to his brother's wife, Clara, so she could run ID checks on the faces. She did that for a security firm she worked for.

"Pina Colada, por favor, Señor."

"No really, I am not Cuban." The bartender said.

"You do not speak la lengua."

"Nope. I surf and study chiropractic medicine."

"Verdad, no one wants to be Cuban anymore. They lost their chi chi's, no."

"You are new here. More happens besides ethnic backbiting. It's business, just business."

"Who are you anyway?"

"A bartender."

"Do you know any Cubans?"

"Nah. They stay to themselves. Five-fifty for the cocktail. Out of twenty. Thank you."

Biggie was starting to freak out. He had been in Florida for one week visiting his uncle. His uncle was a man of means with junk yards and a set of business partners with large operations involving moving stuff into the pipelines for re-distribution. Biggie got a job – or really a territory - within which anything he could boost was his. The uncle introduced him to Cuz and now Biggie was on a vacation enjoying his first big score. Where is the f'ing Cuban? He thought.

"Hey, bartender. You have chicken wings?"

Biggie didn't notice the single man in the gray suit pay and leave. He did notice in the bar mirror that the couple in the corner of the restaurant were beginning to loosen up, at least she was. He looked stern, up tight, for sure.

He turned his attention to the two guys down the bar.

"You guys drinking? I'll buy a round."

"Nah. We're not gay." Chuck said.

"I'm being calm." Biggie said staying seated. "I will ride my sweet-assed bike over your ugly mother-fucking face in an instant if you do not grovel before me now and apologize."

"Who are you? No one talks that way. It's too extreme." Bob said. "It's just business. Nothing else matters."

"OK. If that's how you roll, I can do that." Biggie said. "What are you drinking?"

"How about shots?"

"Shot's all around." Biggie ordered. Biggie didn't give a shit but would throw down over nothing after a shot or two. He thought of himself as capable of murder. His knife was hidden very cleverly.

Chuck and Bob didn't care one wit about the biker with the 'tude.

Wendy waved her thank you from her corner table to her new best friend in the bar. "Thanks, Dude." She said raising her glass in a bar-style salute to those who are about to join you in inebriation.

She turned to me, "Let's sit at the bar."

I watched her shower and dress between short bursts on the novel. I was feeling Biggie-esque, kind of edgy and ready to pop if I didn't find a less harmful way of loosening up. I started pacing, I didn't know it. I didn't mean it. She saw it immediately.

"106, you know I love you. You are nervous, edgy even. What is going on with you?"

Her face was so sincere, everything about her spoke of love and caring.

"You've gotten good at that."

"At what?" she said.

"Looking kind and loving. I see that. Deep within me I know that is how you feel about me, the Me you know."

"I hear a 'But' at the end of that. Am I right?"

"Now would be the time for a spicy little quip, but I do not have one. I only have my bad attitude."

"106, sit down, let me hold your hand or stroke your brow. We both need to rest."

My self-doubts laid there in the middle of our conversation like some foul brew. I looked at my shoes as if to say I had stepped in something.

"Don't worry," she said. "How's the book coming?"

"You don't want to know. Some very un-hippie things are going on."

"Those things are going on in your head. Those things are going on right now, but in your head. Do I have that right?"

"Yes, I am becoming Biggie."

"Who's Biggie?"

Biggie started to calm down. Wendy walked up and sat next to him, her hand on his arm, saying, thank you for the shot, can I buy one for you?

“Wendy,” I said, “There are limits.”

“Peter, don’t be a dick.” She said, which veiled the slurring voice in which she said it. “Why don’t you have a drink?”

“Wendy, I would then have to go to the toilet without you.”

“Is that a problem... aw, I forgot, I am your prisoner. Let’s go together. We won’t miss anything.”

Biggie didn’t want to see her go, but he heard the talk and now he watched them walk which made him chuckle having thought it.

“I hate that,” said Chuck.

“Hate what?” said Biggie.

“Chuckling. Even the word pisses me off.”

“Maybe you are gay.” Biggie mumbled.

“I hate that too.”

“What’s your name? Mumbles?”

Chuck spit out part of his rum and coke as he laughed. “I like you. My name is Chuck.”

“Biggie,” Biggie said.

They shook hands.

“Have you ever killed anybody?” Biggie asked.

“Just two, today,” said Chuck.

Bob was watching football replays.

It was a typical Florida condo. The view was a water view.

“Not bad,” she said.

I was still trying not to feel the desire to kill, that Biggie obviously was excited about. I could feel it, nonetheless. I also felt the terror of finding the fictional woman I love had become a criminal of unexplained dimensions.

“I better hurry.”

“What? Where are you going?” She said.

“I have to finish the book and soon.”

“Whoa! I should pay attention to that, I bet.”

She cuddled up against me. She had had two drinks so whatever she felt was heated by rum. Having said my piece, Biggie went back to his role in fiction, and we fell asleep in each other’s arms.

The Sun had risen before we woke. She was right: the trip was long, and we would need to sleep.

My dreams were full of faces in various twisted grimaces as if in pain. “Guernica.” I said out loud and woke myself with a start. It was then that I found a calm way to live with Biggie in my mind, I hoped.

Wendy and I walked the beach gathering stones and shells. We sat and dug holes for our feet. We talked about the way our lives had turned. We ate at a small café that caught our eye. Went back to the beach, wished no one else was there, headed to the condo for a ‘massage,’ slept the rest of the day, woke before dinner, and headed back to the Pirate Cove Inn.

It was already familiar territory.

Chuck had been barfing all night. Bob sat up in bed watching porn, still too drunk to get an erection.

“That was a party. Did I get laid?” Chuck said exiting the bathroom.

“Nope. You tried, but she was drunker than you were. She called her husband on her cell and he came to get her. No guns were shown, but I bet he had one. We'd better pack today.”

Chuck went back into the bathroom and in between sessions he yelled out. “Up chucking. I'm up chucking.” Then he would laugh.

“You are weird Chuck. Really weird.”

If you have never been in a motel room waking up with your crime partner upon whom you depend for information about what you did while blacked out on rum, then you have no idea how paranoid Chuck became after he barfed his guts out.

Nothing changed until Chuck's stomach veered towards normal. He began to search for his clothing. He was missing a sock, so he got down on the floor to look under the bed. It was scratchy, but soft enough. He passed out.

Bob was ready in his own mind. He had shaved most of his face. His underwear was on backwards, but he still got his belt through all the loops on his pants. He had noticed that when he put his Glock into his belt: it wouldn't stay put if he missed a loop.

Chuck began to move again. He rolled over onto his back. Rubbing his eyes, he began to focus on his brother.

“Are we on the road today or what?” Chuck said.

“Are you silly? We are so trashed we would die.”

“Bob, you are a coward.”

“Chuck, you smell bad.”

“I do not.”

“I mean no harm. Take your hand away from your piece.”

“I don’t feel good.”

“What do you want?” Bob asked.

“Rum. “

“I want food.”

“Toilet.”

“Good luck.”

If you take away the sand, the sun and the rum, there would be little to attract one to Florida except the loose morals. Wendy turned to reading and I wandered the beach clubs looking for a place to sit and write where the stimulation of the patrons was available.

The second day I walked a half mile in each direction, but nothing matched the Pirate Cove Inn in comfort and attractiveness to the 'element' that excited me most: The Criminal Element.

The day bartender was a young Cuban who appeared to be in the drug trade. I never saw him in action, but the people who came to his bar were of that type. His name was Randy, but I think he had a trade name of Raul to identify him as part of the Cuban secret society that the newspapers said controlled drug traffic 'near Sarasota.'

Randy knew I liked a beer now and then, so he would look my way every half hour or so to determine if I needed a fresh one. Otherwise, he worked behind the bar, chatting up the customers and especially the three men who had been in the bar on Christmas Day.

"My Uncle is Emil de Los Santos, owns three junk yards in the Sarasota area. He knows everyone worth knowing," one of the customers was fond of saying, a young guy with a west coast accent who didn't seem to know anything about Florida or anything about Cubans, that is if you relied on Randy to be honest with everyone.

"Cubans do not run Florida. It is just business, like any business, supply and demand. If you want it, you can buy it. If you have it, you can sell it. Simple. Not racist or anything."

It was hard to beat the Pirate Cove Inn for this kind of overheard dialogue.

I spent the entire day in the Pirate Cove Inn bar the third day and that was when I was inspired by the notion that everyone was just sitting around waiting for something to happen.

Wendy came in late in the afternoon, had a beer and lured me back to the room for another 'massage.'

Wendy paced around the bar greeting Biggie, Bob and Chuck.

“Hi, guys. Good to see you. Name’s Wendy. Remember me?”

From my perspective none of them would recognize themselves in a mirror. I was trained in threat recognition and, outside the random molecules of anger flowing through their dissipated bodies, none of them could raise a hand higher than their lips. They all were armed except Wendy although by the rules of custody I was armed to protect her.

I carried my favorite weapon: a pen knife. My cousin once told me how he escaped custody in a Mexican jail using only his singing voice and his small knife. From that moment on I carried two. One was in a pouch built into my left shoe and the other kept on a chain around my neck.

I couldn’t sing a bit and still can’t. Wendy didn’t care. I thought about loving her. She accepted me back into her life after I ran from her. It was later while working on another case for the Bureau that I recognized her in a photo lineup.

“That’s her,” I said, and the SO had me off on her trail the next day.

“Remember she is highly trained and expects you to fall for her. She’s a femme fatale.”

I chuckled since he thought he was speaking French. Still, he impressed himself.

Wendy turned from her greeting and noticed a couple, a familiar looking couple, enter the restaurant.

“Peter, remember them?”

“Just tourists. We’ll sit and wait it out. My SO should be here in an hour.”

We had stayed together in a rented condo a couple doors down from the Pirate Cove Inn. It had a nice beach view. She was loving and sweet and talked me into everything she wanted except that I wouldn’t admit that I had her wrong. It was plain that she fit in with the three heavy drinking guys all of whom I was convinced were carrying.

I sat at a table by myself as Wendy had her last romp before she was locked up.

“Peter, would you buy a round for the bar? One last one?” Wendy walked towards me as she proposed this extravagant expenditure. “Look, after a drink we can go back to the room and snuggle.”

It was past lunch rush, and the bar was just the same crew as Christmas except for the SO wasn't around.

“Alright, Wendy. Drinks for everyone.”

“Yee-ha,” she bellowed skipping over to the single guy, Biggie.

“Shots,” she said.

Bob, Chuck and Biggie all enthusiastically ordered their favorites. Then the four ceremoniously quaffed their liquor down, slamming the empty glasses on the bar.

Chuck looked queasy and headed for the toilet.

“Biggie, are you packing?” Wendy asked.

“What? You need a wack?”

“Maybe. There is this mean man who was here yesterday and is coming back. He's FBI and he's after me.”

“Oh, you are dangerous. Muy peligroso. What about the stiff at the table? Friend of yours?”

“Sometimes. Today he is. Maybe.”

“I don't know. FBI is some serious shit.”

We waited at the Pirate Cove Inn until 2:30. I had hoped the SO would show but he didn't. Maybe I had the message wrong, so I called the number for field agent contact. It did not answer after four rings. I hung up.

Wendy had started me thinking.

My cell phone was the only contact I had with SO. I turned it off.

She was facing Biggie. He was telling her about how some guy in California was greased in a drive by. Then he started talking about a Cuban who he thought was after him.

I listened until he reached for his rum and coke.

“Wendy, let’s go.”

“Now?” she asked.

“Hurry.”

“Whoa, Tiger.” Wendy reached for my hand and pulled herself from her stool and then pulled me with her.

“Bye guys.” She said as we went out the exit door.

We were gone, and the SO was not to be seen.

“Peter, I hope you love me as much as I love you.”

“Wendy, I don’t care about the SO. He missed our date. He missed his chance and now you are mine.”

“Fair and square. Let’s go to the beach.” With that she stripped her sweats off and exposed her one-piece bathing suit to the daytime sun. She dropped her clothes at my feet and ran across the sand and into the Gulf of Mexico.

I watched her swim from a safe spot above the tidal lines. The water felt unwelcoming to me. Really, I haven’t liked water in large amounts for some time. I had an unfortunate incident in high school that effectively eliminated any chance of Canadian government employment. It hounded me for years until I met Wendy, since she didn’t care, I forgot about it, then she ran into the sea, and it all came back again.

Nothing difficult had ever happened to me. I grew up on the Pacific Ocean on Vancouver Island. Surf and scuba gear were all I cared about. My friends and I lived on the beach for weeks at a time. The way the parents described their son’s drowning, I stood by and watched him die doing nothing to save him. It could have easily been the other way around. No one witnessed the tragedy. It was my story

compared to their heart broken imaginations. I was sixteen. They were both elected officials. They had no trouble making news with their anger. I lost my best friend and had almost drowned myself.

I watched Wendy swim farther and farther out. On impulse I disrobed and was in the water swimming towards her. She began to wave. In a minute I was swimming near her looking for signs that she was in trouble.

“Peter, thank God you got here. I need help, if two of us stand together we might be strong enough to stand still.”

“You can touch?”

“The bottom? Yes. Can I touch your bottom?”

It was then that I realized my past could betray my present.

“You have a plan?”

“Maybe.”

The wave motion was too strong. We struggled with her agenda for a while, gave up and headed for the condo and a shower and so forth.

After almost a week of just hanging around the condo, beach and the Pirate Cove Inn, I was over the idea of vacation. The warmth was nice. But as the people became predictable, which was a downgrade from wackos and felons, they also lost their stimulating effect on me.

Wendy must have felt it, too. She became more animated and started drinking a little too much each day. The merriment often added pleasant but exhausting endeavors to our days.

Florida became a pleasure, then too much, then boring and then gracefully over. I didn't want to rush. We hadn't entered the second week, yet looking back, the best days were in the beginning, before the bartender began to say, 'the usual', and the answer would usually be, yes.

“Ennui.” I said.

“What?”

“Ennui. You know that sweet feeling of nothing desired, an emptiness that was sought and now that it is here, there is nothing.”

Wendy smiled at me as she reached for her Rum and Coke. We were sitting at a small table in the Pirate Cove Inn's bar. It was late on New Year's Eve afternoon. Her expectations were high for the evening's fun. Randy had a nice buffet planned with shrimp and dips. It was a break in the action, at least.

The boys, as Wendy called them, had not been around for two days. Since it was a change, it was noted by every one of the 'regulars.' A regular around here was someone who might have been in the Cove before. As far as I could tell we might have been the winners in that competition. If you return year after year you are an old-timer and have a favorite seat where the dinner hostess would automatically take you.

“I still have desires.”

“Wait 'til tomorrow. Maybe you are a day behind me.”

“You don't desire me?”

“Wendy dear, maybe ennui only happens after sex. It won't last long.”

Wendy saw Biggie as she came back from the toilet. He was parking his bike almost in the walkway to the front door. He had new garb and helmet. His shades were serious upgrades of the throwaways he was wearing on Christmas.

I watched her get excited about his arrival.

“Find a new toy to play with?”

“Caught me looking?” She whispered.

“Drooling. Is it the clothes? Maybe the hair cut?”

He still has his helmet on. “Look you know I love you. I am your captive and you are mine.”

“No problem. We are all cut from the same cloth.” I said.

“No, we aren’t. We are kind and generous. They are serious criminals.” Wendy was still trying to convince me she was not the rightful target of an FBI hunt. I am not certain that she actually believed I was a non-US, FBI consultant who had just gone rogue.

“We may as well be.” My hopes and dreams had never been very clear to me and the idea of a career in crime was becoming ever more attractive to me as I saw firsthand the lifestyle it afforded.

“Biggie!” She shouted when he walked through the door. He looked around seeing that a small crowd was gathering early, and his usual seat was occupied. He found Wendy waving ‘come over’ to him.

He came over.

“Biggie, this is my almost husband, Peter. Peter, Biggie.”

“Pleasure.” I said.

“Mucho gusto.” He said. “I am thirsty. Too much work ruined my flow.”

“What do you do?” I asked.

Biggie looked at me for a few moments as if sizing me up for the first time.

“The Game.”

The Game is criminal talk for thieving, murdering and other physical pursuits involving crime.

“Where do you play?”

“Around Sarasota for my Tio Emil.” He answered. He was barely 21. He looked rough but not mean. “It’s just a job.”

“I’ll be needing one.” I said.

“No you won’t, Peter. It’s me and you and our home in Michigan.”

“Wendy, that’s all over. I’m rogue. They’ll come visiting.” I whispered.

Biggie ignored our interchange. “Wendy, you still need a wack?”

“Nah. Too much.” She said as she waved at the bartender for his attention. He saw her and made the gesture of all around. Wendy pointed to the three of us and said, “The usual.” He nodded and went to work.

Biggie decided to sit.

“I have brownies. You want some?” Biggie offered.

“Let’s get the party started.” Wendy said. “My stash is gone up in smoke. You are a godsend.”

Something felt wrong. Wendy was checking out of reality, and I was left with my fears.

“Umm. Nice. Thanks Biggie.” Wendy said, after the silence as she ate a medium-sized brown slice.

The afternoon became happy hour and then dinner time. We ate, but Biggie sought other company. He said something about a chica prima and darted across the bar. Wendy wanted down time, so we headed back to our condo and whatever high jinx she had in mind.

“We have time and I am so hmmm...”

“Gotcha. Maybe we have a free pass and will get away with it.”

“What?”

“Living in denial.” I said, “We have got to clear the situation up or it will come back and surprises us.”

“Who says?” She said, pulling me out of the Pirate Cove Inn.

After a couple of weeks everything settled into what had the danger of turning boring. Wendy knew.

“How about going dancing?” she asked.

“Dancing? I have dim memories of doing that, emphasis on the ...”

“Dim. I get it. I’ll wear boots to save my toes.”

“Not that kind of dancing. I have no rhythm and no melody either.”

“I love dancing and singing. What is life without it?”

“For one it’s safer. Two, singing looks crazy to me. The idea of it being me looking like that well ...”

“106, is that really you?”

What could I say?

“I *can’t* remember you dancing or singing, come to think of it. How funny to miss that.” She realized.

“I have other secret deficiencies.”

“Tell me one.”

“It’ll be sad.”

“Of course, all secrets between lovers are sad. Second thought keep it to yourself. I’m enjoying the ... what did you call it?”

“Ennui?”

“Yeah, that. A secret would make me cry.”

“My father never taught me to fish.”

“Oh my god. That is sad, but that is not a secret, is it?”

“Not anymore.”

I was letting my beard grow out and I had given myself a buzz cut, that and with the two layers of sunburn I had collected, I looked different, maybe not perfect, but in a disguise.

She started in on complaining how rough I was getting.

“I am trying to hide from SO,” I said.

“Gawd, y’all know how I hate those SOBs.”

“Wendy,” I said. “No one becomes a southerner more quickly...”

“No. Do not go on.”

She had already dug her nails into my back when the topic of the FBI came up.

“Even if they fire you, they should pay you through today. You were loyal most of the month.”

“Nonetheless you are sounding like a local. Not bad, just true.”

She rolled out of bed and into the bathroom. I was such a fool. She was a wild animal with a world of experience beyond mine. I didn’t carry a gun. She had almost killed me. I know, not really, but she shot my car, which is the same thing for a guy. I forgave her because it wasn’t really mine. It was a company car. I couldn’t care less what happened to it. She had been my target. Now, that was no longer true.

The way she fooled me into believing she was innocent was, in a word, romantic. As I ran down our history together it made a good story. It looked like a comedy and then, in another way, it could quickly become a tragedy. A good writer could draw her character with sympathy. Mine? Well, I always felt slightly dirty. That would eventually come out.

I have no idea how long she was in the head. I was asleep when she returned.

I would have answered her question about the book because I was getting into the independence of the characters. It showed that they were more than plot-driven creations obsessed by revenge or sex.

The drowning story made me uneasy. I was never much of a swimmer. As far as I knew Wendy wasn't either.

With the two murders and the drowning that would make three deaths in the book already.

“Wendy, your character is getting a bit too much for me. She is becoming a public inebriant and flirtatious with the young men around her.”

“Are you worried about her morality?”

“Never thought of that. What if they have sex in a way she wants to describe? What would I do?”

“You are a sex by innuendo kinda writer.”

“Sometimes I think I write, and nothing happens in the story, as if I wanted to test the limits of boredom.”

“There must be a name for that, but it might be a step ahead of the nihilism which you are fond of.”

“You know how people in Florida are. Armed and Dangerous is a synonym for Floridian Guy.”

“You might be a little over-the-top exaggerating.”

“Take the Pirate Cove Inn. The regulars meet just about every day. They are armed and become drunk while all the time needling and arguing with each other. What if one of them betrayed another, went snitch on their criminal careers. What if they draw their guns and kill each other like in ‘Reservoir Dogs’?”

“What if?”

Writing fiction was clearly becoming more of a problem in my life than I had ever imagined. It takes courage to write. I wondered out loud if I had the courage to Ctrl-A-Del the thing if it went too far.

“It could be exciting.”

“Give it a try. See how you feel.”

Cuz was facing some serious time. De Los Santos' kid nephew had brought the suits with badges into his warehouse. Cuz wasn't his cuz' or his uncle's either. Biggie and he would later laugh about how Cuz had never been introduced to a narc in a suit before. It was quite a shock, which is a huge understatement.

But that was later, near the end, what's it called? The denouement – my favorite part of the story, if it's any story at all.

Cuz had a good lawyer. Truth is, everyone who mattered knew what Cuz did in his warehouse and a number of high-level officials in Sarasota did business with him. He was a kind of lost and found that served the whole community.

No one felt Cuz would betray them. When the City of Sarasota bought snow removal equipment following a freak storm that paralyzed the City for hours, it was not three weeks before the equipment showed up in one of his yards with cash payments made to two city council members. It was at bargain basement prices. Everybody made out.

“The best thing that ever happened to capitalism is taxes. Little known fact, I swear, 90 cents out of every tax dollar spent goes to corporations or equal sized private concerns.” That's what de Los Santos told Cuz and he believed him.

“There are so many crimes being committed in Washington DC and the state capitals, that no one tries to keep up. Political power means the power to destroy your enemies. Everyone knows that. Even you.”

De Los Santos was a perfect businessman for Florida. He fit in. He made Cuz' business profitable and protected him against problems, like the one Cuz had now.

“Be smart. If you ever get the power over another, realize if you exercise it, you make an enemy.” De Los Santos could go on and on, but it sounded sensible.

Cuz walked out of de Los Santos' office in One Sarasota Tower with views of Siesta Bay.

Cuz drove away from the city of Sarasota in his favorite car: a cab. He had spent a week talking to his attorney and was finally free to follow the trail that would lead to Leonardo aka Biggie. He had a question for him.

Cuz was older than Biggie. The real Biggie, Biggie Smalls, died in 1997. Leonardo was maybe 5 or 6 and running drugs for that guy, who Biggie said his homies zippered for him about the same time the real Biggie was murdered.

Cuz' cab pulled onto Highway 64 West and he felt a light-headed sensation.

My depression deepened beyond ennui. Nothing was happening for me. My book was mired in lowlife criminals daydreaming under the influence of laced brownies. All the villains were turning out to be nice people. The excitement I was seeking, or was it fearing, was lost in unmet possibilities.

On New Year's Day, she broke it to me: Her name was not Wendy. No, she was none other than Northern Girl, one of the most trending bloggers on the Inter-tubes.

"Really?" I said, having not heard of such a personality. My eyebrows were raised as if to open my eyes to something new. "I've been having trouble with my browser lately."

"No prob. I'll send you links."

She did, but I did not want to look.

He called himself Peter, however I immediately decided that was not his name. Once he had no name, he was welcome in my world, a world of nature and white dresses on women with flowers in their hair. 'Peter' won't do under those circumstances. I am sure you understand how this could be, so, like you would do, I left his name, the one he arrived with, out of my life, and gave him a respectful position in my life: 106.

This blog is not about feminist overachievement but just my experiences with him. 106 is the love of my life, a beautiful being. When he discovers that I have been writing a novel about him behind his back, the subject matter may change dramatically, but until such a time I will be the only voice you hear as we explore a small world in a small forest in Leelanau County, Michigan.

I couldn't go on. There is no underestimating the confusion that I experienced. Imagine, I thought it was just me who was writing a novel, but no, she was too. I was back to where I began: Who is she?

Bob and Chuck woke in their car. Bob had parked in a nearby motel lot after the Pirate Cove Inn's security guard woke them and asked them to move along. They were too drunk to walk to their room, which, if they had been sober, they would have remembered was 50 feet away from their parked car.

They were awakened again when the Press-Ledger's morning paper delivery hit the machines at the motel, which were directly in front of the red WRX.

Once awake Bob raised his head to see what was going on and saw the headlines blaring something about a murderer's photo. The headlines were a bit confusing to Bob. He pulled on his shoes and left the car to get a better look at the paper.

"Where are you going?" Chuck asked.

"Paper," Bob said.

"Who cares?"

The door opened and Bob's slight frame expanded to his full height. He held on to the door for a few seconds, letting his spinning head slow down enough for him to imagine walking.

"Crap." He said when he got close enough to see the picture. "This can't be."

Searching his pockets, he found two quarters and using both hands, one steadying the other, he managed the two coins into the slot. He opened the box carefully hoping not to drop the lid on his own hand. Successful, he weaved back to the car.

"Oh, damn."

"What?"

"It's you or could be you. Paper has a story with a picture of you holding a gun pointed at a man's head. Yup, it's you, sure as hell." Bob said. His heart was beating very fast, his voice was stressed and an octave higher than normal.

Chuck lifted himself off the rear seat. He moved very slowly as if he had a beaker of nitro on his head ready to explode with the slightest shock. By the time he rose fully and was attempting to focus on the paper, Bob was shouting a string of

profanity that impressed Chuck with a sense of danger that considering his state of mind was impossible to defend against.

“Chuck, I am calming down,” Bob said, “I’m going to start over. I do not think I am going down the right path.”

“I’ll say. My brain is not working. I have missed something. Why are you so angry?”

Bob seethed. Seething for Bob was where he breathed through his teeth with that hissing sound seething is known for. When this story was first told to me, I started laughing imagining the still inebriated Bob startled awake to find that his even drunker brother, Chuck, was a stone-cold killer.

“What the hell.” Chuck said. “How in blazes did this happen.”

Chuck could read. Sometimes he read a murder mystery or a spy novel. He didn’t do this often, but he had a soft, slow side to match his fearlessly immoral life-style, if that is what he had, in any case he would read to fall asleep if he hadn’t already passed out from his life-style.

“Well, you blithering a-hole, it says here that the murdered woman’s cell phone had this picture on it – ‘the one taken before she took one of herself in what might have been her last act before her own murder.’ Wow and this guy is so like you, I think it is you.”

“Oops. I don’t remember doing that.” Chuck said. “I may have. I can’t say for sure. It all seems too much at the moment.”

“Wow, it says here she had been talking to the 911 operator after a one car accident when you showed up. After she realized what you were doing, she took the picture. You didn’t notice and now they will catch you.”

“Nah. No one knows me but you, and you are not going to be a problem since we are both in this. I want a drink or two so I can think.”

“The Pirate Cove Inn?”

“We know where it is.”

“Chuck, no matter what, I am your brother and will act accordingly.”

“Bob, I trust you like my mother.”

“You shot her eight times.”

“She deserved the first few.”

“I agree with that, but ...”

“The last five were to set up an insanity plea. I read about that somewhere. Anyway, no one cared.”

“Yeah, no one.” Bob said. He would have gone on about this but thought better of it considering that Chuck was nowhere near sane at the moment. But then, on second thought... “Chuck, our lives have been short, but so weird, I doubt anyone would ever guess at what we have been into the last few years. Ma was the only one who knew. Now it’s just us. Too bad, ‘cause we would make a good reality show, don’t you think.”

“Not today. Talking hurts. Listening hurts.”

Bob knew he was a big brother who needed to set a good example. He knew if he kept on the path he was on, death would result. Consulting his own wisdom, he determined that it was best to drive to the Pirate Cove Inn and get a start on the day. Dwelling on their past and life with Ma would only ignite those old feelings that Chuck assured his brother had led to her untimely death at 36.

Meanwhile, Cuz entered a cab.

“Compa. Pirate Cove Inn, por favor.” He said to the cab driver as they left the outskirts of Sarasota.

Cuz enjoyed knowing how to move around without being noticed. He was not fat or skinny, not tall or short. He was the color of most people in Florida, a brownish hue. He had no tan lines.

As he left the cab for the front entrance to the Cove, he began to consider what he might find inside. Even as he was deep in thought, the Press-Ledger’s headline drew his attention. He searched for coins found them and bought the paper.

He was looking at the picture as he went into the Cove. The lack of light forced him to stop. He looked around and saw that he was not the only one who had a morning cocktail in mind.

“Yo.” Randy, the bartender said.

“Raul, the usual please.”

“Uno segundo, Señor.”

At this early hour, everything is calm. There are no loud voices. No laughter. This is the serious hour when no one within is interested in talking, just praying to their first and second drink that their head would clear, and they could remember what is was they were still living to do.

Cuz had decided not to bring his weapon this morning. Biggie was not some lowlife who stole from him. Biggie had brought him extreme danger. It would be easy to blame him. But his uncle ... restraint was required. Facts mattered in this case.

He wasn't looking for Biggie. Biggie wasn't looking for him. Biggie, hopefully, knew nothing of what happened to Cuz after he rode away on the Harley Cuz had given him as partial payment on the powder. It was all good up to that point. Cuz had told him where to go and wait until he showed up to settle with Biggie.

“Be patient. Here is enough to party for a week. Have fun.” Cuz felt like it had been a good move to be generous with him. There was no need to change now.

Cuz sat at his favorite table in the shadows where his device would be easiest to read. His favorite morning drink sat in front of him. His back was to the wall dividing the bar from the restaurant. The bar mirror gave him views of everyone at the bar. He had a clear view of the entrance. He was not nervous.

He texted his second in command a note about a business meeting and that he would be in by noon.

The bar started to empty out as the clock neared 8:30 AM. Two men still sat at the bar. They were arguing. Cuz looked at them as closely as he could. One of them looked familiar, they both looked familiar.

They stopped bickering for a few moments and Cuz decided to satisfy his curiosity. He walked up to the bar and stood a few seats away around the corner of the bar under the glow of a Seagram's decorative light.

"Buy a drink, boys?" said Cuz.

"Nah. We aren't gay," said Chuck.

"Sure," said Bob.

Cuz looked at Chuck and remembered where he had seen his face before. Cuz smiled and looked at Bob and remembered where he had seen him before, too.

"The usual?" Asked Randy, pointing at Bob.

"Sure. Thanks, Cuz."

"You remember?"

"Yeah, about once a year we see each other so we can reduce our stock of watches and firearms. How's it going?"

"I forget your name."

"Bob."

"Ah yes, Bob and your brother Chuck. Roadside warriors for beer and hookers."

Chuck came to life again.

"Yeah, hookers. Where are the hookers?"

I read as much of her blog entries as I could. She was a good writer and I enjoyed her take on our life together. It was, however, a little more than I could manage to understand: what had been happening to me? I thought it was my imagination but now competition for the role of creator appeared.

That night, determined to read more of her entries, I stayed up all night. I suppose I learned something about her that I didn't know. I did learn some things about me I don't remember ever knowing.

The first entry she made, I read as the sun was rising. I recall laughing at the thought that I had read the last five years of her life in reverse from yesterday back to the day I left.

He is gone. I feel it in the pit of my stomach. He did not say goodbye, so I have a hope he will return. I started cleaning the house as soon as I realized that, without him near, I would have to pay attention to my own life.

Peter is no more. He left on a quest for his place in life and when I see him again, he will be called 106. I will tell him that there were 105 before him but I will lie in a way he will not realize. He was also 16, maybe 15, and every number between.

106 will come back because we are a story together, one we both want to tell. It has no end. He will come back for that.

Her site had a gallery of old pictures of us, taken by friends or the girls. There we were swimming in the lake near Empire. The children look wet and cold. I look cold. It was the first of May. It had been a silly statement of how anxious we were for a summer still probably a month or more away.

There was one of us walking, holding hands, taken from the back as we looked up into the maple trees glowing as the sunlight streamed through the leaves. It is my favorite color a blend of blue, green and yellow that sparkled so brightly. The color is mostly imagined being too difficult to see after a split second.

He will miss his place at our home. I know he will come back to see if he is remembered. He will need proof. My blog will be the proof. It will be my journey waiting for him to return home.

By the time Biggie walked through the door his hands had stopped shaking. Wendy stood next to him with her hand on his arm, a look of concern on her face. I took that picture because something had gone wrong.

Wendy and I had been walking up from the beach and saw the whole thing as it unfolded.

At first sight, we both squatted down on the sand. The SO was talking to Biggie who was in cuffs. They were standing around the corner from the parking lot which was why we had a view coming through the low dunes on the beach side of the Pirate Cove Inn.

Biggie's pants looked shiny for Levis – especially his crotch. Wendy noted that he must be scared and pissed himself. It wasn't true. It was a biker thing. We both chortled when we realized.

The SO was talking to him, and Biggie was staring at him as if he were listening to a death sentence. Biggie kept shaking his head.

They stood in silence for a while, then the SO who looked as if he were considering his options, said something. Biggie spun around, and the SO freed his wrists. Biggie stood there. The SO walked away and left in a pursuit sedan with lights flashing.

We walked towards Biggie and the picture happened. Whenever I look at it, I see Wendy as a caring person. She cares about criminals being harmed by law enforcement questioning their activities. We saw things differently.

Biggie was dry as a bone and professed the need for a drink.

“Why not?” Wendy said.

I stood outside for a few minutes. No one cared. I thought about reading the news. The rack was empty. The morning newspaper was sold out and it was still early. I went into the restroom, then into the bar. It was a typical noontime scene. Small groups stood around. Chuck, Bob and a new guy at the far end of the bar. Wendy and Biggie near the door. Biggie running some story down to Wendy. Randy asking for drink orders.

“The usual,” I said as his eyes met mine.

“Si, Señor,” he answered.

“Do you have a paper?”

“Lemme see.” Randy said as he passed Wendy and Biggie heading for the corner of the bar.

“Cuz, you have a paper to lend the guy down the bar?”

“Nope. It’s a keeper. Sorry.” He waved at me and whispered to Randy. “Raul, get him a drink.”

There were a few customers in the restaurant. The couple I’d seen come in for a drink or two and a little food were there. They were serious people. They were country people.

They were on vacation, probably slept late and read in the sun all day.

Wendy woke up as I was still trying to let my mind relax enough to fall asleep. She was excited. She wanted to talk, to get me to talk, all the while she was trying to get me to do other more, timely things given the hour and our condition. I tried. I fell asleep.

When I woke, she was still in bed. She was wearing her recently bought reading glasses and had her tablet on her chest. I saw her in profile. Woman at peace, admired by man awakening to a new world: That is what it would have been called if it had been a painting. Nothing else is worth thinking about.

“106, now you know for sure. Don’t you?”

“Coffee.”

“It’s in a thermos near your head. Shall I pour it for you?”

“I got it.” I said. “I was blind, but now can see.”

“You didn’t write that.”

“Must have been a mis-quote.”

I sat up and sipped a little coffee. She sat and typed slowly, determinedly, on what I couldn’t see.

“Do you like what I wrote?” she asked.

“I like who wrote it.”

“Do you like who wrote it more for having read it?”

“Yes.”

“Then I succeeded.”

“It was a love letter.”

“Yes. I love you.”

“I’m hungry.”

“The Pirate Cove Inn.”

As I watched her talk to Biggie, I doubted she felt anything for me. She said she cared, that she loved me, but what was that when she could fawn all over the obviously shaken younger man.

I looked down the bar past Chuck and Bob to the new guy at the very end. I wondered if he was part of Biggie's problem. Maybe it was the Cuban he spoke of.

My thoughts turned to the SO and the near encounter that would have been very awkward. Things were getting weird, and as the saying goes, the weird got going.

Wendy walked over to me and as she did the stranger walked over to Biggie.

"Peter this is going to get strange. Biggie and the new guy have history," she said.

"Let's finish our walk. They won't miss us."

We left. She was so willing to go I wondered if I was underestimating her.

"Wendy, do you love me?"

"Yes, Silly."

"What does that feel like? I might be stressed out trying to figure this out. We have had a strange relationship and the strange is not over."

"No shit, Sherlock. I say we go for a ride, maybe to Sarasota, maybe to the Atlantic side. See some crocs or gators or whatever. Sightsee a little."

"I like that idea."

We finished our early afternoon walk, gave each other massages and fell asleep. When we woke it was dark except for the constant and multiple flashes from a number of emergency vehicles, from down towards the Cove as near as we could tell from the bed of our condo.

"Don't look." She said.

"I don't want to know." But eventually I would find out.

The bad part began when Cuz pushed Biggie's chopper over onto the gravel surface of the parking lot. Biggie threw a lit Zippo at it. The explosion charred poor Cuz a little. Cuz was instantly sorry he was unarmed. He begged Bob for a

weapon but was refused. Bob, Chuck, Biggie and Cuz needed to flee and all left in one cab heading north up the Island. The police and fire responded immediately. No one pursued them. That was a Tuesday.

Wendy and I laid low until there had been no sign of law enforcement for 24 hours. We forgot all about the crocs. Thing was we did not want to move. Moving would trigger more alarms than staying still would. I lived in a delusion that somehow this renegade status would begin to make sense. I started considering how long we could survive in Florida before we would be forced to travel north again.

“I don’t want to go. It’s nice here. Warm, friendly.”

“Friendly? How about abusive, weird maybe even wacked?”

“OK. That too, but I want to stay as long as we can.”

“Money’s going fast.”

“I have a few bucks I’ve saved.”

“From your international criminal past.”

“Yes.”

I know she would never have told me the truth, so I figured she was trying to mislead me by jokingly stating the truth. It was a complicated play, but it didn’t work: I believed her.

“You admit it.”

“You are a goof. Let’s hit the Pirate Cove Inn for happy hour.”

Wendy and I stayed away from the Pirate Cove Inn after the fire. We missed the small company of regulars that we recognized on sight. We knew none of them except for Randy, yet we had a strange affinity for them.

It didn't take long to make repairs.

At the beginning of happy hour on Thursday we were alone in the Pirate Cove Inn except for the staff. We seated ourselves at a corner table. Randy brought us the usual. The food came. We ate. All the while I was thinking about her blog and the book she was writing about us. Her point of view was so special: There had never been another like her, none I ever met or heard of.

The notion that she would wait for five years for a boyfriend who left without packing and without saying goodbye makes no sense in today's world, maybe in the 1900's, in someone's imagination. It was absurd. Yet there I sat across from Northern Girl and I was the one and only 106.

“What does the tattoo on my neck mean?”

“If found please return to Wendy. Postage guaranteed.” She said.

“Oh.”

“No. Just kidding. It is an ancient Chinese character that means this side down or actually, if you can read this you are too close.”

Wendy could hardly breathe by the time she started in on the ‘if you can read this’ part. She was laughing so hard she went outside to catch some air. As she left the other couple we had seen often, came in. They looked wary about what they would find but headed for the bar and out of sight.

When Wendy returned, we paid and left, thinking about a long walk and a good book for another pleasant night in paradise. As we were walking through the parking lot the young guy whose uncle owned junk yards drove up in a late model Cadillac. I nodded. He nodded back.

That was enough company for me.

Biggie and Cuz came to terms on the FBI's powder. Cuz didn't want to pay Biggie the market price of 5 pounds of blow since he didn't have 5 pounds of blow. Biggie wondered how it was his fault. Cuz wondered how the FBI showing up to arrest him for the blow was his fault.

They were sitting across a table from one another, one of those 3 by 8 collapsible tables sold everywhere. The table was in Cuz' warehouse a few miles north of Sarasota.

"Cuz, sir, with all due respect, are you sure the FBI followed me, instead of the FBI following you?"

"Brah, tell me the story again about the fed who cuffed you behind the Cove."

"He was talking bunk. Said he was going to tell you I did it on purpose if I didn't turn witness. Said he was going to make my life hard, put me in a cell with a bunch of Cubans. Said 'you know what that means.'"

"Biggie, I am a Cuban and no, I don't know what that means, and if you give me a chance, I will not think you did it on purpose. Your uncle protects us both. I want to respect him, so I will be kind to you."

"My uncle set me up with a car and a small salary so that I could have the tools I need for my job. From now on I am to see you, for work, for directions."

"He told me. He told me not to kill you. He said you are a good boy and his sister – your mother – would be sad as hell if I did."

Biggie did not want to tell Cuz everything he knew.

Biggie's sister-in-law, Gloria, had emailed ID's for the people in the Cove on Christmas Day. There was an FBI agent – the one who cuffed him. There was another strange guy, he was a Canadian, a private consultant with a CIA front group or maybe not, but still the possibility was there. There were two other guys, brothers, with no means of support, by now he knew them as Bob and Chuck. They also seemed to work closely with Cuz in his warehouse.

To celebrate their new working relationship Cuz invited Biggie to Happy Hour at the Pirate Cove Inn. They rose from the table, abraozed, and left in a cab together.

When they entered the Pirate Cove Inn, all the regulars were there including Bob and Chuck. The 30 something couple was leaving just as Biggie and Cuz arrived. Biggie exchanged nods and hellos as they passed each other.

Wendy jumped off her stool when Biggie walked in. She walked over to him asking him how he was. Biggie gave her un abrazo. He whispered in her ear. She turned from him and returned to our table.

“What was that?”

“He says you are CIA. He used the term gusano. He said you are a Canadian, but at least you weren’t a Cuban.”

“What’s his problem?”

“He’s from California. People make shit up there, I guess,” she said. “Did he have anything right?”

“I am not a Cuban. The rest is, you know, wacked. A CIA Canadian? That doesn’t work.”

“Unless you are a Canadian and the firm you work for is a CIA affiliated front group. I’ve heard of that before.”

I didn’t want to talk about this except as we walked on the beach.

“Wendy, let’s take a stroll. It’s stuffy in here today.”

“Peter, I like it here. I forgive you for your error about my past. I am glad you came back for me even if it was for the wrong reason.”

As she talked to me, Biggie, Cuz and the brothers sat with heads together at the end of the bar. Cuz went deep into thinking. He made a phone call, paced back and forth as he spoke into his cell. He flipped it closed and turned to walk to the bathroom. As he passed our table he stopped. He pointed at me.

“Gusanos are traitors.” Cuz said.

I flashed him a peace sign.

“The peace movement was CIA, too. Gusano.” He said as he left our table staggering toward the head.

“Whoa. He is under a head of steam.” I said.

“He’s had a long day,” Randy said over the murmurs of the patrons.

Nothing really matters. We walk on the earth for a short time as a person or a species. Either way, we are here today and gone tomorrow: Short timers, most of us never connected to any place or time. In the big picture, that's how it was.

Frame of reference is a difficult achievement. Writers have some advantage in that their work results in a record which might demonstrate a frame of reference. It might be argued that a successful writer produces writing that makes that demonstration in a non-trivial way – otherwise why bother.

Wendy wrote ‘from the heart’ as she put it. Her openness was refreshing. The way she described her sorrow and loneliness was classic woman speaking to her gods, not a plea for mercy but a cry of truth. Where did her words come from? Were these ideas looking for words or did the words flowing from a secret place and in some random fashion come to mean something?

I had no idea where the words I wrote came from. Wherever they came from gave no hint of an end. The other classic writer-type feels it is beyond him or her to control either the message or the timing. Images of a dark room, paneled in oak, bookcases bulging with leather bound tomes; the writer, small at a desk, a deer in the lights, lost in imagination. A friend took a picture, and the flash revealed his craven face amidst the clutter that remained from the obsessed writer’s requirements for food and drink.

No way would that be me.

I have no favored place to sit and write. When I was taking my five-year sabbatical, I wrote almost every day. I also played pool every day. Wherever I found myself, I always sought the small bar with the table and the ebb and flow of people playing 8-Ball. In the height of the cacophony I would sit, sipping beer, and let the power within move my fingers across the keyboard. These places were among the others, the restaurants, the special places in the house that occasionally offered the distraction I needed to relax my attention to my present tense to release the beings of imagination.

“Wendy, I am glad I came back, but I don’t think I was wrong to go.”

“I am glad you came back, too,” she said, “But what moved you to conclude it was not wrong to go?”

“Northern Girl, there might not have been a Northern Girl.”

“Let me think about that for a while.”

She was in the middle of reading one of the novels I wrote while on sabbatical. A story, I had come to love, of a glorious example of revenge properly taken, a revenge that freed everyone from the curse of the original act. There is no room for hatred in such a revenge.

We were sitting on the beach mid-morning. I had been staring at the shore break in front of us. The birds were busy in the foam, digging for its delicacy. Nothing mattered. There was no time except as it was marked by the ebb and flow in the waves’ hypnotic repetition.

“106, this book is hard for me to understand. Who is the writer? You or one of your characters?”

“Are those different?”

“I see. You become your characters, or one of them. Hmm, but then ...”

She wanted something that I would not be able to give her. Having not found a better question she re-immersed herself in what she found difficult.

There is another moment in a writer’s process that stands distinct from the rest. I watched a video of an artist’s short life. Jean Michel Basquiat, an immigrant in New York, an Andy Warhol prodigy, who painted many works at once, who troubled each one until some flash of realization left him nothing to do. It was declared done by that mechanism; a dream left to fantasy until fantasy is complete. A process that comes to an end, when the process says so.

“But,” she said. “Why all the theology?”

“You liked the history, the math, the mythology of Eden?”

“I did. You don’t stop there. You go on. Why?”

“I love you. That is the question. After thinking and coming to a conclusion why do we go on to see more than the words convey? I wasn’t satisfied even then, even when this one is complete. I went on for 250 pages more. I say ‘I’ but you know.”

“I do. I, mean, I do?”

“Who is Northern Girl but another person whose interests are limited to the issue of the day? Who writes those? Do you or your creation?”

“Oh, no. You are saying that without your conscious choice, a decision made ...”

“I did not mean it. I think I see ...”

“How could you?”

“Then I didn’t.”

“OK, Then what was that?”

No one wants to depend upon the help of another. No one wants to be told that the reason you are successful is because of me, not you.

“I love Northern Girl. Totally mean it. It is what you hoped: ‘proof’ you love me and always did.” I said. “Where would I be without her? How could she exist if I did not leave.”

“Exactly ...”

“But I see it as context. I am part of the context for her writings. My leaving is part of the motive for the blog.”

“And your book ... what’s it called?”

“Forever After.”

“Adequately over drawn.”

“Oops. This has gone too far.”

“Then it’s done. I still love you, you egomaniacal theorist.”

“Nice, that was so much better than A-hole.”

“I tried.”

I was having trouble with my identity.

On the one hand I was a supposed writer. On the other hand, I was a skilled operative capable of bringing down international criminal conspiracies. On yet one more hand, I was a captive of a femme fatale whose training as a conspirator had exceeded my abilities as a spy and now, I was a hopeless captive of her attentions.

We sat on the beach. I was totally hungover for the first time that I could remember. Cuz and Biggie had ganged up on me and, in the hope of figuring out who I was working for, kept me slamming shots in an effort to make me talk. I am a cheap drunk and fell over several times on the way back to the condo, I guess. I had bruises. The word for the night was 'gusano.'

"Pedro, may I call you Pedro, Gusano," Cuz said.

"No."

"Peter is so close to Dick. You don't want to be a dick, do you Pedro?"

"Shots," howled Biggie, as everyone broke into tears of laughter in an attempt to dissipate the tension.

I really don't remember the evening very clearly. The police reports were vague. They described a bar brawl that I have no memory of having happened. I had bruises from falling down. That was my story. Biggie's Uncle cleared us from arrest, but it was a strenuous time.

That didn't matter. What did was the trend toward confusion. That night was another data point, another way of confusing who I was. I felt like a character in a novel, but I wasn't. I was real. I am real.

Biggie, Cuz, Wendy: They were trying to defeat me. They were a team. That was obvious last night.

I had a lot to think about. As she and I sat there on the beach. My toes were buried in the warm sand. I watched the little waves creep up the beach. Some birds were making a racket that distracted me from my calculations regarding the chances that Biggie, Cuz and Tio were part of the same conspiracy.

Wendy was sitting doing pretty much what I was doing, watching the birds chasing potential food.

“Wendy, I want to go home.”

“Are you speaking poetically?”

“I miss the house, and its context of solitude, safety and predictability. It has become more welcoming than ever.”

“Peter, you have made me happy and suspicious at the same time.”

“Wendy, do you ever think about death?”

“You don’t drink enough to think thoughts like that.”

“Funny. Not. I am serious. Being who you are, fear of death is probably far from your mind.”

“How do you figure that?”

“Well, start with your history. I saw a list of crimes attributed to your group. People died for you.”

“Nah. You need a break from yourself.”

We began walking on the beach just before sunrise. We walked and sat and walked some more. Once, she grabbed my arm and pulled me to the sand.

“Peter, I want to tell you the truth.”

“I am not going to believe anything you say. You know that.”

“So far, that is the experience. You say I am a criminal. I deny it. Where is the truth in that?”

“Juries.”

“I get you. When I was a kid, we did things that haunt me. When I was thirteen, I put a Cherry Bomb down the toilet. I remembered it last night, as if I had flushed it down the Pirate Cove Inn toilet. If I was charged with that crime, I would plead guilty.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Peter, my friend and lover, trust me and we will be happy. I am yours.”

“I feel a ‘but’ in there somewhere.”

She stood up and reached for my hand, pulling me to my feet. She put her hands on my cheeks, kissed me then grabbed my hands and put them on her butt. Talk about humor in action.

“Do you think I’m paranoid?”

“106, I don’t know how to put it.”

“Yes or no?”

“Maybe. It’s a term of art. It has meaning. There are standards. There is a profession dedicated to telling the difference and stating whether or not etc, etc.”

“Got it. Gives me something to worry about.”

“You are kidding, right?”

“Not exactly, one of my characters is having identity problems, keeps looking for conspiracies involving your character, gets ID’ed as a CIA operative or something.”

“At least you aren’t Biggie anymore.”

“Not today.”

Wendy and I were sitting on the balcony of the condo. We had a clear view of the beach, though it wasn’t the view to die for, it was a view from a seated position. I was sitting at the table in a lawn chair, my hands over the keyboard, hoping for inspiration, thinking there was a missing person.

“The murder. Of course!” I said.

Wendy had been coming and going bringing an early lunch out. We had awakened earlier than normal, taken a walk. We stopped at our favorite breakfast café on the way back, so now after having done very little we ate lunch early.

“I think I am getting fat.”

“Not yet. You were skinny when we arrived. What murder? In your book?”

“Yes. It was a week or so ago, I had no idea what these characters were up to and suddenly two people are dead, shot.”

“Why mention it now?”

“I had an inspiration.”

The best hours for highway robbers start early. All-night gamblers may or may not be carrying a lot of cash, but they are probably driving impaired. Daytime gamblers are hurrying to the casino loaded with cash, while impaired losers are heading home. Accidents happen on the roads that lead to and from the large casinos scattered around Sarasota.

Bob considered his logic impeccable, irrefutable and since it was true, why argue? Chuck never tried. It was obvious the drunks get in head-ons or run people off the road. They'd tried head-ons, but the mess was too vast to make Chuck happy. He lost his appetite.

The alarm in their room woke Bob and Chuck before dawn. They each cycled through their morning schedule. They tried to be quiet. Their loud whispered argument was louder than their alarm. As they climbed into the car their voices were raised to yelling but they were off and at work.

Bob had trouble driving when Chuck smelled as badly as he now did.

“Look, Bob, I can feel your upset-ness. If you hadn't been in such a hurry I could have showered.”

“With your clothes on? No, nothing explains your condition except you were raised by pigs.”

Chuck never saw the subtlety in his older brother's manner.

“So were you.”

“So, was I what?”

“Raised by pigs.”

Bob sat quietly steering the white WRX towards the casino region from Anna Marie Island. He had used some of the proceeds from the Randall robbery to get a cheap paint job. The scanner crackled awake with tales of homeless being roused and drivers passed out in their cars drunk.

“Chuck, staying clean and wholesome is attractive to women. Not laundering your clothes, brushing your teeth, or showering cuts down your chances with each

passing day. I don't know about you, but I could not afford to get a girl drunk enough for her to overlook that odor of yours."

Chuck had heard this all before. He started to counter with recognizing the need for cash flow, but he had been fighting with Bob to not start work so early when Bob said, "We are broke again. I want to call you a name but it wouldn't help. No rum until we score. No bed if we cannot pay the rent. Econ 1, first lesson."

"I get it."

"Stop stinking."

The scanner squawked about a stretch of road two miles ahead of them which was reportedly a scene of a car leaving the road. Several units replied, but none would be on the scene for at least fifteen minutes.

"We'll be there first...There it is." Chuck pointed to his three o'clock. Pointing to a car off the road headed south.

Bob stopped the car and backed up until Chuck stopped him. It mattered whether the car was headed north or south on this stretch. North and they were broke. South, maybe they would score big.

The drill began. Chuck entered the overturned vehicle, robbed the occupants all of whom proved to be unconscious. In five minutes he had the valuables then he rummaged the victims clothing bags that were strewn about from the rollover. Two minutes later he was in the car with valuables and a small case and over his shoulder some clothing.

"These are my size," Chuck said as he cast away his clothes, then he threw out what he didn't want of his thieved clothing. His brother had brought the car up to 90 mph. The trail of clothing spanned a long stretch of road. Chuck had changed his clothes.

"Better?" He asked.

"Thank you. Now what did we get?"

“Bob, I think we did OK. I took this small bag from the front seat. It’s a stack of hundreds. All new.” He rubbed the top bill with his fingertips, put the pile of paper down and looked at his fingers.

“No ink.” Chuck fanned some of the bills and ruffled them looking at the serial numbers.

“The numbers are different. Maybe it’s real.”

Bob trusted Chuck to care about his trade and not get suckered by bad drugs or bad money, both of which could be found every 100 feet in Florida, according to Chuck.

“Chuck, where did you get that from?”

“What? The money and drugs thing? In prison, while you were humping through Iraq, I availed myself of the many inspiring criminal minds I was lodged with. We talked about nothing else.”

“I find that both sad, and I trust, true.”

“These were quality guys. They probably taught a lot of young guys how to stay out next time.”

“That doesn’t make sense. Are you saying you learned to shave by watching others nick themselves?”

“Bob, it’s a jail thing you can’t possibly get.” Chuck focused on counting. “Nice jewelry, worth something.”

Chuck used the calculator on his flip phone to get a sum.

“Bob, two and a half inch high stack of 100 dollar bills is 2.5 divided by .43 times 100 squared is just shy of \$60,000. The baubles are worth another thou, wow!”

“Nice.”

“The nicest ever.”

The scanner continued with notification that three people had been robbed while they laid unconscious from their rollover accident. No one mentioned a white WRX.

“Now what?” Bob said.

“Escape, first.”

“Define escape.”

“Get out of the car at the Pirate Cove Inn, order a double rum and coke. I’ll look at my hands. If they have stopped shaking, we have escaped.”

“Then what?”

“Hide from capture.”

“How do we do that?”

“Do not brag. Do not get blithering drunk. Do not spend big. Act down rather than up. Keep people away from you by not showering.”

“I know that works for you.”

“It keeps you safe too.”

“You are joking, right? You want to be safe, half sober and quiet? Sounds like a career change.”

“Bob, I might put up an argument later, when my hands stop quaking but that sounds impossible right now.”

“Let’s go to Cuz and cash out just to see where we are. Maybe he has ideas for us.”

The newspaper was all over the murders of Randall L. and Harriet Smith from day one. I read every edition searching for clues as to who was responsible for a chilling spat of accident chasing robberies. The Christmas Day murders were during what was the twenty-first robbery of what is now numbered in the thirties.

I thought of it as research for a book, I said to myself. There were some unsavory people hanging around the Pirate Cove Inn. They could be my models.

Cuz and Biggie stopped harassing me about the CIA business.

“Cuz,” I said. “You are a man of the world. If I am not mistaken you were drawn to the Christmas Day murders by the very first newspaper story about them. Remember the keepsake you wouldn’t lend me?”

“Murder? I’m not talking about crime. It upsets my stomach.”

“That’s what I thought. You are a man of action, clearly. So why did you buy that paper? You wanted to act. But what was the action?”

“Swat flies.”

“You would have grabbed a free one. No, it was what you saw that drew you to it. The headlines, the picture, the mystery?”

“I was running an ad in the classifieds. I wanted to see it in print.”

“That has some possible truth in it.”

“Pedro, or should I say Gusano?”

“Pedro works. Gusano is too judgmental. It’s just business.”

“Pedro, then. Pedro, there are many questions, most of them revolve around gambling and crime. I don’t like questions too much because it makes me wonder about who’s asking and why. I am married with a mortgage. I have responsibilities”

“Cuz, I didn’t figure you for a family man.”

“I am. Two kids in college. One wife. Canasta friends. I am a little league coach. My wife volunteers at the church. I am a respected businessman.”

“Then, tell me what made a respected businessman want to follow that story?”

“If one is in business, one carries cash. It cannot be helped. So, I am alert to robberies. The story has its other fascinations for me. In the end it is political.”

“Cuz, that could very well be.”

“Why you asking?”

“I think of it as material for a book: Something about modern highway robbers and their victims.”

“Do you write?”

“I try. It’s just a hobby.”

“Take your time. Watch out for the police. They will not be pleased to find out a man with your past is in their territory. The publisher of the local paper hired his son as a reporter to work the crime beat. He was good. Very tall, which I mention because when he was somewhere you could see him.”

“He stuck out in a crowd.”

“Yeah. Like that. He did a story on corruption in law enforcement. No one cared, at least out loud. A month later he falls for a married woman. Her husband was a renegade ex-cop, drank, hit her. That kind of stuff. Long story short. She sues for divorce. The tall kid is in the court every day. The ex-cop sees him. Figures it out after he hears the news from a drunk off-duty cop in a bar. Soon to be ex-husband says he will kill him. Drunk cop says, be my guest. When his ex-wife and her new husband the reporter, come down the courthouse stairs after their justice of the peace wedding, the angry husband walks up and shoots him six times and walks away. He was never arrested.”

“The moral?”

“Don’t get married. It can kill you.” Cuz said laughing so hard he drooled down his chin.

I listened to Cuz. He had been through a few rough spots, yet he kept his sense of humor intact.

Happy Hour had gone on as usual with all the regulars in attendance including the elusive 30 something couple who always came a few minutes early and always sat alone, quietly sipping a drink or two before nodding to people as they left to walk down the beach.

There were days when the best moment was the Happy Hour Sunset. When the sun and sunset were fully over for the day, Happy Hour ended. Some evenings when the bar is full, people are motivated by the impending end to cheap drinks, giving their all in an attempt to reach even higher levels of chaos.

Everything happened as projected. The couple left. Cuz and Biggie arrived and then Bob and Chuck. Chuck was growing a beard and had shaved his head. I had never seen that combination before, and it seemed humorous.

“What are you laughing at?” Wendy asked.

“I’ve decided to write a book.”

“You told me you had already written two or three. What about that? Was it just cover for your secret agent life?”

“It was part of my context, yes. Now that I am rogue, I am hoping to hide in my past, again.”

“Sounds confused. You don’t sound like yourself at all. It’s all the gusano nonsense. Where the hell did that come from?” Wendy was talking and waving her hands until Randy handed her a rum and coke. She stopped waving and talking simultaneously. After a gulp or two she shouted thanks to Randy’s back, he high signed her in response.

There was a shout for last call as the visible direct light from the sun disappeared below the darkening sea. The afterglow would last ten minutes with no clouds in the sky. After last night’s debacle I determined to remain undrunk.

Wendy and the boys were heading into their respective tanks as usual.

I pulled out the file I had with the clippings and decided to review the chronology, to put together a timeline of activities around the accident and murders. It was getting thick. On the top of the file was the first news of the photo recovered from

Mrs. Smith's cell. I studied it in the last of the daylight looking for details I had missed. The face of the murderer intent upon killing Mr. Smith was drawn with tension and purpose. I imagined the scene. I felt myself in the position of the wife looking up as she did, as the photo implied. The face of the murderer stood in stark contrast to the lighter car seat covers. The car was upside down. Something started nagging me. There was something I should see that I did not.

The Happy Hour had devolved, as it almost always did, into drunken high jinx followed by calls for cabs, the staggering merry-makers waved good night, as they moved towards their bedrooms wherever they may be. By the time I left with my files, only a few in the restaurant still remained.

I walked back towards the condo along the beach, my mind spinning everything I knew in an attempt to find the lost meaning of what I saw.

"How will they catch him?" I said out loud. "There is a photo of him, but the killer's face is contorted in a way that makes him invisible, that makes him so unlike himself that sitting next to him you might not know, especially if he changed his face some way as to become unrecognizable."

The sand was warm on my bare feet. I sat to think. The surf was roiled by the wind. The heat of the day was meeting a cool breeze. I got goose bumps.

She walked up behind me with a sweater I'd left behind in the Cove.

"I am sorry to bother you, but this is yours. It's cool enough to need it," she said.

I don't remember seeing her before, but she must have seen me and retrieved it for me. She must have seen me leave and noticed I had left it. She had been watching me and followed me. What else was there to conclude?

"Thanks." I said. I moved to stand to introduce myself, but she put her hand on my shoulder to keep me sitting. She sat.

"Peter, I am amazed how far down you have journeyed, since we engaged you to consult for us. Your choices have drawn criticism, and I was sent to find out what we can do to heal our painful relationship."

"I'm sorry ...Do I know you?"

“My name is Jane Doe.”

“I see. That’s helpful.”

The wind and the sound of waves masked the meaning. I concluded that I was in trouble. She kept her eyes on me. I felt them. My ears burned. My embarrassment was real. Imagine feeling five years old with your grownup dream of a sexy woman. It was something like that only, as stunning as she might have been, my five-year-old saw a mad mommy and I was sad.

“Peter, or is it Pedro?”

“Might be Gusano.”

“I like that.”

“Thank Biggie or my SO, probably him.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Five words in the question, an infinitely long answer.”

“Short story.”

“I am more than you imagine. You see a contract. I signed it. That is not the end of it. I am a failure at contracting with you. I love the woman I have detained. In fact she has detained me.”

“Hmmm. As a lawyer I recommend that you plead insanity, you could say you are a writer, you could say you are a dreamer...”

“And I am not the only one. Oooh.”

“That works. That is what we thought. Sign here. This is your severance check. From now on we do not know you.”

“What about Wendy?”

“The ‘you’ is plural.”

We sat together and talked about the waves and the sun and the wind. She had been in China. She wondered about the end of time. I felt relieved. We hugged a

human kind of embrace between spirits. She asked me to be the one to walk away. It felt just, even poetic, so I did. I walked to the condo to find Wendy asleep on the couch.

I booted up my laptop with the intention for deleting some files. I don't know why.

'Life returned to normal' was a line I wanted to write in my diary, but I didn't keep a diary. If I did, I might have had a normal to return to. But, no, I deleted an unwanted download.

That gave me time to think. All the obvious questions went through. I concluded that whatever it meant to someone else I had done the right thing. My future was my own. No one wanted a piece of me. I was born again.

I was so relieved. It felt like I had escaped death.

“106, do you know you are crying?”

“You don’t know the half of it.”

It was supposed to be a book about our relationship. We were together, we parted, we came back together, happily ever after. If it doesn’t sound very interesting to others, well ... but, it does matter.

“Tell me enough to clear your mind.”

I wanted to say how much I loved her, but I thought it was trite to be so blunt.

“I feel like leaving again.” I said.

“A few days ago, you were glad you came back.”

“I am sure this is normal.”

“Normal what?”

“I’ll venture a guess. Is it normal abnormality?”

Her face went sad. There were things that mattered. Making a friend sad is one of them.

“106, your path is hard for me to follow. I wish we could agree on life together and be happy ever after.” She smiled at me with tears in her eyes. “If we said to each other a few sentences that we both agreed were true and we said that as long as these were true, we would be together, and we said that as long as we were together we would be true to each other, would you go along?”

“Let me think about that,” I said.

“What’s to think? Define love. Do you love me? Define marriage. Will you marry me?”

“That’s what I thought you meant.”

Biggie made his decision. Tio had said that if Biggie felt ready, he should take down the man in the position he wanted and go from there, whatever happened next.

Biggie listened to Tio. Tio had signs of power, He had men working for him, in and out of prison. Making plays. Doing business.

If Biggie wanted to be somebody, Tio was it. There was God, and then there was Tio.

“How can I kill God?” Biggie joked to Tio.

“Don’t try.” Tio said. “Your mother, my sister would never forgive you.”

Biggie had seen death and how quickly what’s bothering you comes to an end. Bang. Over.

“Leonardo, I can see your mind’s wheels turning. I doubt it will matter to you, but there was a way I took to get here, in my position with power over others, including the power of death. If you sit with me and listen, you can learn to be God and not come to a bad end too soon.” Tio didn’t know how it would go for Biggie, but he thought time might make him a man; time, a little education in the Game and some patience. It was the patience part that was so difficult to imagine Biggie possessed.

“Tio, everyone wants to be you. I want to be you. If I listen to you, you tell me to take what I want, yet you are telling me to wait.”

“Leonardo, you will lead when I am dead, but you can also lead before I am dead. Let me restate my point. Imagine you see a man with a nice car and a fine woman. It would be foolish to shoot him, steal his keys and try to take his woman. That is too direct. No one would think you were a leader. They would think you were too impatient, you would be arrested for murder, car theft and rape and kidnapping. We would never see each other again.”

“Tio, I hear you say to take my time. I have much to learn. If I stick with you, you will teach me to lead.” Biggie smiled as he talked, despite his hardness and wildness, he was wise in some of the ways power worked. Things were more orderly than he had expected. “Why not”? He asked himself.

“Leonardo, the difference between stealing and earning is the difference between jail and power. If you want it, try earning it first. You will learn how to hold what you have.”

“Tio Emil, with respect, I will follow you. You are my patron and I will back your plays and make none of my own, sin tu permiso.”

“Gracias Sobrino, I have high hopes for you. Eat your meal. Don’t waste.”

Tio stood from the table and with a nod to Cuz and Randy, he walked toward the exit door and the warmth of the February evening. Biggie watched him walk away.

As Tio left, two other patrons, two men who had escaped Biggie’s attention, walked to intercept him as he approached the door. Tio waited for them to open the door and to leave first. Tio followed the men at a distance, through the door and away.

“Oh.” Biggie thought. “Tio has security. Good to know. Gotta respect that.”

After Tio was gone another man Biggie had missed rose from his seat in the restaurant and walked to Biggie’s table, tapped his fingers twice. Biggie had seen the gesture before. Gamblers used it to say the pot is right, or your move, depending on the situation.

It was the FBI man.

Biggie hated the FBI man. Hated seeing him here. Everyone knew who he was.

Nevertheless, Biggie rose and followed the agent out the door.

Cuz saw him go.

Bob and Chuck were so drunk they could have as easily imagined the entire scene. Who knows what they were thinking, if that is what one could call what they were doing.

Outside the SO grabbed Biggie’s shirt and pulled him up against his chest. With his mouth inches from Biggie’s eyes, the SO explained how Biggie was going to tell him everything that Tio said.

“What the ... You are a shit for brains FBI a-hole. That is my family. He speaks so only I can hear. You familiar with gator hunting. He is into gators. Maybe you would like to hunt one?” Biggie said.

“I can burn you if you are too much of an asshole.” The SO released Biggie who paused to straighten his shirt.

Biggie liked Hawaiian shirts with flowers and other Polynesian symbols. He tried real hard to keep them neat and not all wrinkly. The SO had messed up the one he had on. Biggie thought about greasing him. People would thank him. Wendy would thank him. Then he remembered Tio’s little talk.

“FBI gusano, you are a bully. No one likes a bully.”

“Aw, did I wrinkle your girlie shirt?”

“You have been hassling me. I may be young, but I will become powerful and will squash you one day. No one will care except me. You will be dead and won’t care. I will dance on your grave. What is your name?”

“Edgar.”

“Edgar who?”

“Hoover.”

“Ah, you are a vacuum cleaner.”

“Fuck you.”

“Made you say it.”

“Fuck you.”

“I saw a guy get shot full of holes. Little ones. He pissed me off. I burned him with a neighborhood punk. He died. The punk? Who cares. No one cared. Maybe J. Edgar will care about you.”

“He’s dead.”

“See, Gusano. Learn from Edgar. Slow down and live.”

When I heard this story Biggie only had two days to live, but that was a lifetime later after fate reintroduced us to each other.

The time passed. February began with a heat wave and ended with another one. Wendy and I bonded like never before. We breathed the same air, walked the same path.

“Let’s go to Mexico and get married,” she said.

“Elope? What about the girls? What about Carl and Jim?”

“They eloped. The girls, well maybe we should wait until they come back to Michigan. Maybe you might change your mind.”

“Duh. Northern Girl, I love you like the wind loves the grain. There is never going to be another for me. No one else could stand me.”

“Who says I can stand you?”

“Point. Match. Wendy.”

We sat at the bar for a change. My paranoia had subsided over the weeks. There is a difference between fear of the unknown, and the realization that as the unknown became known, the fear changed to a manageable dread.

Wendy called them the boys. They seemed to own the place. The brothers, the Cuban, the Kid, the Uncle, Randy, the couple from hell and the man in the suit: those are the ways we identified them. Wendy liked the woman in the couple from hell.

“She is like me. We are the only women in here. We must have something in common.”

“Yikes. You do not know her from a hole in the ground. She is dangerous.”

“How do you know?”

“Well ...”

Wendy looked at me as I tried to find a data point that could lead to my conclusion.

“She drinks too much.”

“Ah. Everyone but you drinks too much. So what? She is only dangerous behind the wheel.”

“She has secrets.”

“You made that up.”

“So?”

“So, maybe we have things in common. Her boyfriend looks a little like you. He is harder, maybe a drug addict or a gun runner.”

“You call me paranoid.”

“Why should your imagination run everything?”

Biggie started thinking bigger every day.

“Tio, after I am you, what should I want to do?”

“Whoa, you are a presumptuous boy.”

“Momma used to call me precocious for wanting to take over the block.”

“Now that you are older, your youthful spirit is a bit pushy.”

“I can hear you saying be cool, wait your turn,” Biggie said. No matter how many ways he phrased his question he realized that his uncle was never going to tell him to go for it. “Tio, I need to think big. Help me.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t play the Game.”

“Maybe the Game is too small.”

“Do you know Zapata and Villa? They are really OGs. They took over a bit of Northern Mexico. They were poor motherfuckers. Everyone on their side was poor. They figured out that to win they had to even things out, or else the same old same ol’ would be in charge.”

“Why not just pop the richies.”

“Reasons.” Tio said. “There are people who control things. There are things, things that control other things.”

“Tio, I hear you; I feel you, which is an expression of a deeper meaning. The way I see it, the way I feel it, if I want something I should earn it before I try to possess it. If I possess it, I must protect it.”

“Leonardo, you are ahead of yourself. Remember, I said I got here following a path, which even though I thought I knew what I was doing, looking back, I might have been more suave. ¿No es?”

“Verdad. La vida es mi vida. I shoot until shot. I fuck until fucked. That is the way. No one cares if I have issues or values. They want. I stand in the way. I die or they die. Tio, I love you for helping me. I just don’t know how to be with you. The world I feel is not the world you see.”

The way things are allows room for anyone to be themselves: Freedom is not just a word, it is a way to be together, happy or not, peace or war. Try something else if you dare. To dare is to be alive. Biggie didn't think that. He might have, but if one examined his internal process it might have been missed: he did not give a hot god damn what anyone else thought. It was a way of being.

Biggie left the table in the restaurant, leaving his uncle to finish his flan and cream laced coffee. He went to the men's room and then out onto the beach. Normally Biggie wore sneakers without socks, shorts and his favorite Hawaiian shirt of the day. He had been in Florida since early December and had never intentionally stepped into the sand.

He had been in a deep discussion with Tio.

"The world is the way it is, and you are the way you are. Each of us makes our own way in the world," Tio said in between bites and swallows. "Maybe you should walk along the beach. After a few miles the beaches all look the same but of course they are not. After you are lost and cannot tell one from the other turn back, sit down again open your mind to new things and then let's talk some more."

"OK, Tio. For you, for your good humor, I'll walk."

As Biggie reached the shore he turned south and began to walk into the sun.

"Prometheus," he said to himself. School had never been his strong point, but he had learned to read. The first book he paid attention to was a tome on Greek mythology. In second grade he found a book on Aztlan and then he heard that Biggie Smalls had been killed. Just as he was to begin dreaming for himself, Biggie Smalls stopped. He thought Biggie's soul must be free and roaming the ghettos looking for a new body. "I am Biggie, the new Biggie," he had said.

The traffic along the shore road was sparse. The walkers along the beach outnumbered the cars along the road. As he walked, he saw that most of the walkers were women, or women with children. On a very straight section he saw a mother and child digging near the water's edge a few hundred yards ahead. As he neared them, he saw that it was a woman and a young boy, both brown like coffee beans. The woman was crying, her back to the approaching Biggie, her shoulders

shuddered, her hands covered her eyes. Her son sat in a hole he had dug, feeling the water rise to fill his shorts with sand.

Biggie kept walking. He didn't care about ninos and chicas. He cared about himself and his dreams.

A memory erupted in his mind, a day like today. He and his mother sat at a park bench near Lake Merritt in downtown Oakland. It was warm in the sun. He had been playing in a small amusement park nearby and now after petting all the animals in the zoo they were heading home. As they circled the lake, she suddenly broke into tears, sat on a bench, and held him close to her with her arms encircling his smaller body. He could feel her chest heaving as she struggled to breathe and cry at the same time.

"There is something I must do." He turned and started back towards the woman and child who had not moved.

As he neared them the second time, he could see her face. The sadness that enveloped her was plain. A few steps away from them he stopped and sat. He could hear her talking to her son.

In a minute he stood, walked closer and sat near them.

"My name is Leonardo. May I please help you?"

She looked at the stranger; saw her son a grown man in Biggie's eyes.

"Gracias, Señor. My name is Felicia and mi niño is Javier. He is three."

"I saw you weeping, and I was moved to talk with you. I can help you, if you need help, ask."

"We are alone in the world. I was an orphan when he was born and now, he is half an orphan."

"His father?"

"Muerto." She said the word entirely before the tears flowed and her shudders made talking impossible.

Biggie wanted to tell her about his day with his mother in tears, his father in prison and then murdered in prison. He had come to believe it was natural, the way things were, and he had to make the most of what he had been given.

Biggie moved closer to them, sitting close enough to touch either of them. She was near collapse from sorrow. He reached towards her to comfort her. The little boy in Biggie found his mother in her and did what he did not know how to do, to care and comfort another being.

“Have you eaten today?”

“No. Tenemos hambre, Leonardo.”

“I will feed you.” He stood, picked up Javier, reached out a hand to her and then the three of them hand in hand walked back towards the Pirate Cove Inn.

The trip back seemed shorter to Biggie than the journey out along the beach. As they walked hand in hand with Javier in his arms, he wondered how Tio might have known he would find a greater purpose in life by helping someone who needed the help he had to give. The memory of his mother crying and he, Leonardo, about to become Biggie, had nothing to offer her except his hand.

“What trickery.” He said.

“I am not tricking you.” She said.

“Not you. Fate, chance, you know, one day things are grim and then the sun comes out at the right moment.”

“Leonardo, patience, I am very complicated. I may be more trouble ...”

“Felicia, I have food. You need food. To me that is enough. It is all I know matters.”

As they walked towards the Pirate Cove Inn’s glass front door, he saw the image of a little family going out to the beach for the day. When he reached out to the door handle, he half expected to feel a man’s hand.

“Wow, did you see them?” he said. “In the glass.”

“You are a funny guy.”

As they entered, all eyes found them.

Randy said, "Biggie? Who's this?"

"New friends. We'll sit in the restaurant." Biggie said.

In the restaurant where Biggie had left him eating, Tio Emil sat doing a crossword puzzle. He looked up saw Biggie, saw Felicia and Javier.

"My manners? I am getting old." Tio said as he rose from his seat to introduce himself to the two new people. He showed no sign that he thought this out of the ordinary. Biggie wouldn't have noticed anyway.

"Leonardo, you didn't tell me you had new friends."

"Tio, they were caught just now. I found them hungry."

"Raul, menus for our new friends."

Biggie sat back in his chair and watched the scene unfold as the other regulars one by one came by to meet Felicia and Javier. The food was ordered. Randy brought it and served it to them as if it were the rarest dish instead of a hamburger with fries. Javier ate only toast at first, then a cheese tortilla everything plain, no jam, no salsa.

Tio asked her questions about her and her family, about her son and about her son's father. She answered respectfully. They talked until the meal was complete.

As Felicia and Javier prepared to go, Tio had another question.

"Where are you going?"

"Out."

"Just out?"

"Tio Emil, you know my story. Where would you go?"

"I wouldn't." Tio turned his eyes from Felicia to look at Biggie. "And you? Are you going too?"

“There must be a rule about helping someone that says if you find them you must keep them.” Biggie said.

“Wow.” Said Tio.

“What?” was the chorus.

“That didn’t take long.”

Wendy was the first to notice that the Kid had a girlfriend. I was busy trying to figure out how long a drive it would take to get across the border to elope and return to the condo. When Wendy poked my arm and said look at the Kid and his new squeeze. I wasn't surprised.

"Had to happen."

"106, if you tell me that, right now, in your book, you say that Biggie gets a girl, I will be your admirer forever."

"Wendy, I wrote it, but something isn't right with the whole scene. It will come to a bad end."

"Maybe, in your imagination. Our Leonardo is a different sort of guy. Not Biggie at all."

We left pretty much as usual before the real happy hour began. Everyone seemed at ease as we left.

The beach was nearly empty. We walked to the water.

"You can almost see it from here." She said.

"Mexico?"

"Yes."

"I was thinking, Wendy, I don't have my passport. I might have trouble getting back into the US."

"Not backing out on me, are you?"

"Just a pestering feeling. Sorry."

"The book?"

"Yes. Biggie fell in love. His reign of terror is over. He'll change his name back to Leonardo and settle down working at his uncle's junk yard."

"106, I think you need a vacation from being a writer. Maybe Mexico is going to be good for you. Let's fly to La Paz. I love La Paz."

“No passport.”

“Let’s go home and get it. I could be done here. Into the house. Grab the ID. Head to Grand Rapids and we are free again.”

“Something tells me this is another trap. The house will eat us, and we will never see another warm day until late spring.”

“It could be cozy.”

“Wendy, I don’t want to bum you out, but I would rather stay here. Wait... I have a wild idea. Let’s march back into the Pirate Cove Inn and announce we are getting married and see what happens.”

“106, I see what you are doing, and it just might work.”

By the time we walked in, the social lubricant had been oiling up the regulars as they took Leonardo’s new friend Felicia into the family. Rounds of shots complete with toasts had taken a huge bite out the group’s sanity. Neither I nor Wendy had considered anything else in our excitement except our own story.

Ever vigilant Randy saw us enter and waved us over to the bar.

With a gesture of his arm, he introduced us all to one another, provided a round on the house, and we toasted Leonardo and Felicia.

I ordered a round and announced that Wendy and I were to be married as soon as we could figure out how.

“My new best friend,” Leonardo said. “Let’s both get married now, right here, tonight.”

He turned to his Tio, “Tio, can you make it happen?”

With Emil’s nod the voice of every person in the Pirate Cove Inn hooted approval.

Tio called the four of us over to his table and we began to make plans.

The Cuban went to find a minister.

Wendy and I were free. We had each other and the house up north. I wanted to write a book about our life together. That lasted about a minute until she grabbed my hand, offering the beach and a short walk.

The day had been so wonderful, we pretty much skipped from the condo to the Pirate Cove Inn, holding hands and baying like a pack of wild dogs.

“Peter,” she said, “Let’s get married. Let’s go in and make an announcement and see what happens. OK?”

“OK. Hell, yeah.”

There is a picture somewhere of us standing in the parking lot looking at the front doors of the Pirate Cove Inn. The doors are glass so mirror-like they could be mirrors depending on the light. The picture is a selfie of the two of us taken from the image in the doors. We look very happy.

Wendy and I were greeted with hoots as Randy waved us over to the bar. Rounds for the house were served up and we toasted Biggie and his friend Felicia. They were all smiles. They would be married. It must have been the third or fourth round by the looks on the reddening faces of the usual happy hour crowd.

Wendy ordered another round and with a flourish I had never seen in her before, she declared her love for me, and I for her. Then we said we want to get married tonight, right here, could anyone help?

Everyone drank to the two pairs of near newlyweds. Biggie said “Let’s do it. Los dos. Esta noche.”

Randy said there was a Cuban priest three doors down the beach who lives in the last small cabin in the area. Biggie must have found God because he didn’t object. With that Tio and Cuz, who said they knew the man, went to fetch him.

I thought I would go crazy with laughter as the regulars went into action moving chairs for a dance floor and breaking out the full complement of plastic orchids and roses that were stored in the broom closet for just such festive occasions.

Wendy and Felicia sat on stools together trying to understand each other in the mayhem. They were both beautiful. Wendy with her northern wintry look and

Felicia who's every feature was of a sunny south. Biggie and I tried talking but since the 'gusano' incident nothing more came to mind that we held in common, so we went with what we had.

"Gusano, ..."

"Peter."

"OK, tonight only, Peter. Congratulations on your good fortune to marry such a wonderful lady as Wendy."

"Thank you, Leonardo, I have admired your brass balls and I hope your impending marriage will tame you a bit."

"The differences between us are large. You and I are natural enemies, like lions and tigers."

"Like evil and good."

"Nah. We are alike that way, but we are from such different places we compete. It's just business. Do you feel me?"

I never had been asked to attest to 'feeling' someone in the way he probably meant, which, in any case, was a mystery to me.

"Trick question." I said, hoping he would think me naïve, which worked.

"You are some funny guy, dude. Randy, a drink for my new best friend"

The air was always thick with humidity but now it was electrical with excitement. The bar had changed into a night club just in time for the magic of sunset and hopefully, a wild wedding ceremony.

Tio came back with his two security guards. He approached Biggie and me.

"Five minutes. Cuz is cleaning him up." Tio said.

The two brides had left the room. Randy had engineered a dress-up in the back room.

The Pirate Cove Inn is a used-to-be place. It used to be the private club of a group of men who liked cross dressing before cross dressing meant sexual preference was

an issue. No one from that time came around anymore but Tio has a story about a few of them that would be fun to retell. At least that was what he told me, but he never told me the story.

“Ah, so that is why those gowns are in the back,” I said.

“You should have seen them. They would dress in the big gowns with big wigs and glittery jewelry all over them. They made two lines and twirled to make what they called the car wash. It must have been fun since they did it once a month for over ten years. That was when the rum was good. Not like today,” Tio said.

“I think I know what you mean,” I said hoping I knew what he meant.

“You are a funny guy.”

“I’ve heard that somewhere. I’ll look into it.”

Cuz rolled back into the Pirate Cove Inn and behind him was a small man dressed in a blue Marlin jacket with a white collar. He was old, really old. His afro was silver, his skin the color of dark rum. His eyes were yellow and green, the left one partially closed from an injury.

“Gnarly dude.” Wendy said as the two women reentered from the back.

Tio pulled the scene together ordering everyone to their places.

Cuz took center stage.

“We are honored to gather together these fine people to marry as the sun sets on happy hour. To officiate we have asked Santero De La Torre. He only speaks Yaruba. He has the herbs for a binding and will bind the four together as one.”

The little man was left with the four of us. He had removed his jacket and had donned a robe that reminded me of the pope. No one was allowed to take pictures. No one asked to see a license. We four held hands. We were bound with the stems of herbs and made to inhale the earthy odors of a garden in full flower.

The Santero spoke a few words in English and Spanish. One word was happy, another was love. Wendy thought he said la paz. That was all I got from the words he said. He prayed as a catholic priest prays. His hand would go under his priestly

robe and find a little something to sprinkle on our hands and head. He lit incense for us to wash over our bodies. As it began, it ended.

Tio gave the old man some money. Gracias was said. Cuz escorted him out and away.

Rounds were ordered. Randy played some old wedding music tape from the used-to-be days and we tried dancing as the sun left our view. There was a sadness that overcame us. Something had come to an end, and no one yet ventured a guess as to what was to come.

Biggie asked people to call him Leonardo so his new son, Javier, would respect him more.

“No more kid games. Time to focus.” He said as he toasted his bride who he had met just before lunch and married just before dinner.

“Let’s eat.” Tio bellowed over the crowd. “Raul, menus!”

After the ceremony the four of us sat together for dinner. I watched Leonardo and Felicia look into each other's eyes. Leonardo was having trouble tracking. His uncle saw his distress and came to collect the fading nephew for a ritual trip to the men's room. They were gone for fifteen minutes during which the three of us tried to unravel what we had seen going on.

Wendy and Felicia seemed bonded. Earlier they had followed Randy to the back room where a few old wedding dresses were kept. Randy said that in the older restaurants history tended to be kept behind doors for which keys did not exist. These dresses looked old but not shabby. The two women were so generous with their beauty the dresses looked like gowns.

The minister proved to be so ordinary he subtracted nothing from our solemnity. Wendy was the only one of us to have been married before. She became the expert. The minister was introduced as the Reverend de la Torre. He asked us to say our first names when he pointed at us. He read his line pointed at one of us, we said our name, he moved on. At last, having gone twice around for what reason we couldn't figure out, he said Kiss, then Thank You, then he was gone in the Cuban's custody.

We were wed. That was all it took.

Just as the salads arrived, Leonardo returned looking a little worse for wear.

"I have to go lie down. Felicia eat, Tio will bring you to the condo when you are ready." Leonardo shook my hand, nodded to Wendy and left.

Felicia said, what a day, as she topped off her eating for the day. "People sure eat a lot in here. I'll be fat before I am pregnant."

Wendy said, "How did you meet Leonardo?"

"We are taking business classes at the community college. We were in all the same classes, so we decided to really work together. He is going to take over one of his uncle's stores. He has a bright future."

"You have no children?"

"Not yet. Do you?"

“Two girls, teenagers.” Wendy answered.

“How did you meet?”

“I needed a plumber. He is good at it.” They both giggled and started talking about babies and how much fun they are.

I looked around for the brothers, having missed a chance to sit with them and talk. They were out of sight, so I left the ladies to themselves and struck out into the crowd on my own.

In the Pirate Cove Inn, there are a few hidden places to sit. I found the boys sitting at a small table in the corner at the end of the bar. They were arguing.

“He told me we need to go hunting tomorrow,” Bob was saying.

“Nope, day after tomorrow,” said Chuck.

“Hi fellas,” I said

“That fricken scared me, watching two guys go down together like that.”

“Thanks Chuck, I know what you mean. I hope.”

“You are one funny motherf...”

“I know and thanks for the support. I will cherish it always.”

We shook hands and as I turned to leave, I swear one of them mumbled ‘A-hole,’ but I could be wrong. It wouldn’t matter. Unless something extreme were happened, I would probably never speak to Bob and Chuck again.

After dinner I grabbed a glass of Champagne and made the rounds looking for Bob and Chuck. They always kept to themselves, buying rounds and all but not getting into conversations. Chuck had a new tattoo. This one was on his upper right arm, a dragon in a garish display of yellow, green and red. His beard was getting longish and he kept his head shaved and polished.

*“Hi guys,” I said as I walked up on them at the table hidden at the end of the bar.
“Can I buy you a drink?”*

“We’re not gay.”

“Sure. Shots,” Bob said.

“Randy, the usual for my friends.”

Randy was a good bartender. He watched what was going on so that he could anticipate the orders he might get. “A step ahead of ya,” He’d say when he handed you a drink before you ordered it. He was wrong sometimes, then it became, “On me.”

He delivered the shots and we toasted to the Pirate Cove Inn and to one of the best happy hours ever, and then to Tio, who'd made it all possible.

As I walked away, I wondered if Bob and Chuck weren't in on the same game as Tio, Cuz, Biggie and Wendy.

“Paranoid,” I said.

“You talking to me?” Cuz said. “Not gonna take no gusano crazy talk from you.”

“Cuz, how do you think I would know if you were paranoid. It takes a doctor and I’m not one.”

“You are one funny guy.”

“Enough with that.”

“We talk about you behind your back. You and Wendy need an explanation. So far no good. You like the Pirate Cove Inn and we put up with you. Don't start being all friendly with us. Don't be snoopy. Tio will know and put a stop to it no matter who you are working for.”

That was the longest speech I had ever heard him give.

“Thanks for the advice. You are right. I do like the Pirate Cove Inn. If it weren’t naïve to say, I’d say I almost like you too.”

“Don’t waste your breath, gusano.”

“Cuz, do you know anything about the old days in the Pirate Cove Inn?”

“What? The gowns? That era? Not really. I heard Tio tell the car wash story. Said he had another one, but I can’t remember him telling it. Why, you still writing a book?”

“Might. Wendy said she worked here back when. If I want to write about her, I need to understand the history of this place.”

“You think you can? I bet you can. A guy who ran with the feds and the company. You have to have stories. Peter, I wish you well. But I am not talking anymore.”

I finished my walk back to the table to find Wendy sitting alone with a giant smile.

“I was just imagining the spring and the new garden.” Wendy may have had enough alcohol to make that a shit eating grin instead of a smile. “We made love in the garden once.”

“Yes, we did. I remember the whole thing. We ended up sun burned and muddy. Let’s head to the showers. I am still sober enough to carry you. Ready?” With that we made our exit from the Pirate Cove Inn to return to our condo to sleep in our clothes.

Nothing else happened before we left to go North a little more than two weeks after the wedding. Every day was the same until we started to pack and then one day, we gassed the Mercedes and headed towards Bradenton and the long ride to Maple City, Michigan.

“Let’s stop and say good-bye.” She said as we passed the Pirate Cove Inn.

“It’s too early. They don’t open for an hour.”

“Bad planning. Maybe we’ll do this again next year.”

“Really, I like the idea of La Paz. A short flight and we can sit and do nothing just like here,” I said.

The Mercedes GPS automatically charted the road home. We spent the first half hour picking stopping points that would make our trip five days long, if we traveled four hours a day more or less, at least that was the plan but the first day, Wendy drove for six hours and I for four more, cutting an entire day out of the trip.

In the morning of the second day, we rose late, ate sparsely, and hit the road. We kept to the plan from there on out as the late winter snows slowed our progress. As we neared home, we made bets about frozen plumbing and ambient temperatures in the house.

“Wendy?”

“Yes, Peter.”

“Are we in Michigan yet?”

“We just passed the turn to Detroit. We could be home tonight if we just drive through.”

“Let’s stay at a hotel instead. The house will be cold as hell.”

“I set the thermostats at 56 before we left.”

“Hell is 57 today. I heard that somewhere.”

“OK. Name your desire.” She said. “I like driving. We are now due to arrive in Traverse City at approximately 5:45 PM.”

“The Park Place. Room 907.” That was our only TC hotel experience to date. It would be an icy view of the West Bay with ice fishing in full swing.

“Sounds good. Use your phone and make a reservation. I can almost taste the Eggs Benedict in the morning.”

We drove, that is Wendy drove. My laptop was in my lap. I was about to begin a new experience becoming a first-time published novelist. I made the call to the hotel, then as if I were about to write a note to myself, I launched into the first paragraph:

Not now, and I suspected, never would I forgive my Supervising Officer for setting me up. He lied to me, but then again, why be angry, at this point, life couldn’t be sweeter. It was with un-angry, forgiving distrust, that we parted company.

Wendy and I had just been married. I had carried her to our condo, where she passed out on the bed. I thought I might go back to the party, and as I walked out the main entrance to our building, he was waiting for me.

SO’s are always armed. They have obligations that require a semiautomatic handgun, apparently. He showed me his as I closed the door behind me. I guessed it was a Walther, but if you only have the mouth of the barrel to

judge by, it could get confusing. I really don't care. I would have listened to him anyway. The gun did add a party foul of unnecessary roughness to his side of the ledger. I figured that was when I pulled ahead.

"Dickhead, I mean Peter, planning on going out on your new wife?"

"Dude, you can lower your weapon. I am unarmed."

"A-hole you turned didn't you. You were wrenched. She turned your nu..."

"Dude, don't get all bent. She isn't who we thought. She isn't a highly trained leader of an international criminal conspiracy. We were wrong."

"Shows how effective she is at social jujitsu."

"Whatever. My boss set us free and so should you." I said. He had lowered his gun and was looking at his shoes. "There is no evidence. I no longer work for you or the others. I am married, settling down on a farm and writing mysteries or something for the rest of my days. Happily, ever after. End of story."

"Good luck with that. The market for mysteries is tough to break into, believe me."

"SO we have trust issues, yet I suspect you are right. Who cares? I always have fava beans."

"What?"

"A form of food that I can grow in abundance and never be hungry."

"Of course. Well, OK, I best be going."

"Yes, that would be best." The encounter burned my desire to turn my back on him as he walked away, I slithered back into the condo and passed out next to her.

"Not bad." I said.

"What?"

“I wrote something; therefore, I am a writer.”

“That’s nice, Peter. How about you drive from here. We are 45 minutes from the Hotel.” She said. “And ten minutes more from a rum and coke.”

“Wendy, we have different dreams. I’ll drive.”

It was nice to arrive home after a good night's sleep. Wendy had a hangover, but she was happy starting a fire in the wood stove as I turned up the heaters to cut the heaviness of the cold. If we kept the stove hot all day the third floor might get warm enough to sleep in by bedtime.

“How is the book coming?”

We were sitting together in her chair next to the stove.

“Peter decided to become a writer and has started his own book.”

“That’s crazy. You sound like he’s acting on his own. Isn’t he your creature, under your power?”

“Wendy, things are not as easy as that. Peter as a character was supposed to carry the story to the end but instead, he drops out of his world of spies and becomes a farmer. He turned boring. Who cares to watch him write?”

“I am more confused than ever.”

She curled up against me and fell asleep. I stared through the windows at the forest, Hours passed until I saw the sunset colors blazing above the darkening maple and oak forest, and after watching the last of the daylight move west, I joined her.

Biggie was happy for as long as it took to realize Felicia was foolish to have married him, a nearly complete stranger.

“How can I respect you if you would do such a thing?”

“Amor, I was captured by you, swept off my feet. You fed me and my kid. For that I owe you big time. Leonardo, you do get it that we were not really married by the Santero. There was no paperwork. I never said ‘I do.’ Neither did you. But I like you, your spirit for living. There are the things you don’t know about me; things that make me a dangerous woman to have brought into your life. I don’t blame you for doubting.”

Biggie listened to her, regaining his attraction to her. She was earnest and honest. He might not have known everything about her, but she knew even less about him.

“Oyeme, Chica, I am called Biggie because I am a gangster.”

“I did not drop out of the sky. You heard my answers to your tio’s questions, but you don’t know much about Javier’s father and what became of him at the hands of some villainous gringos.”

It was early in the day. Cuz had given him the day off for a honeymoon. There was nowhere to go. His small apartment was on the outskirts of Bradenton, nearly surrounded by small industrial businesses. When he chose the place, his uncle had told him to be modest but don’t suffer. He chose a place that reminded him of his old neighborhood in Oakland.

“Felicia, in me is a voice, it sounds like my mother, and she is telling me to listen to you, that you are a gift to me if I can figure out how to accept you. Do you feel me?”

“I want to say ‘yes’ but now I have a little fear. If I tell you my story, you’ll feel you have to avenge me and that may not be the way it should go.”

“I hear you.” Biggie said.

Javier was waking up in a new place for the first time and his wails ended the conversation. Biggie began to feel the role of father easing down upon his shoulders.

He jumped from the bed and ran to and from Javier's small bed outside the bedroom door.

"Pobrecito, quiete, no gritas niño." Biggie said as he dropped the now wiggling three-year-old into his mother's arms.

"Thank you, Leonardo. We will be famously happy together. The Santero promised the herbs and the prayers would bind our hearts and souls."

Biggie liked thinking. Now that he had time and the Game was more orderly, he could dwell on the things he had heard from Tio, Cuz, Wendy and now, Felicia. He had listened to her and he had changed his mind from buyer's remorse to back in the fold. He had been taught never to surrender. In the Game there are no prisons or prisoners, just players and dead players. Given some space he felt the Game slow down, grey area appeared in between the black and white of now-or-never thinking.

"Felicia, I am sorry if I disrespected you."

"No worries, we are new friends, but we are friends. I want to practice kindness." She said. "You are tough, Leonardo, but you came back to help me, that was an act of kindness."

The way things went, we warmed the house and settled into the familiar. We planned a wedding for real, one with all the amenities and friends from near and far.

Northern Girl was a smash hit and her ad income skyrocketed as she publicly planned the wedding.

“106, we are rolling in it. My blog, your books, we could do anything we've ever wanted to do.”

“Wendy, wanting and doing are two different things. I am a homebody. I like my ruts. We have too many things, the house is too big, and I do not gamble.”

“What do you want?”

“Time, not the magazine. Sometimes it feels like I am floating through a day. Little breezes push me here and there. Remember the bubbles theory?”

“We are floating in a room bumping into each other on occasion?”

“That one. What’s to want?”

“But time? Where do we buy it? Where can we store it for later?”

“Exactly, given time, everything else follows. Experience teaches, time tempers us. We see each other in ways we had never imagined.”

“There are times of money and times of no money.”

“Yes. But there must be time.”

March in Northern Michigan is about patience and fortitude.

Cuz was learning a new hobby. He wanted to collect Game players.

Tio had a few on his payroll.

Cuz had Bob and Chuck. Tio had Biggie. Cuz knew the story about the highwaymen as Tio referred to them. He had seen the newspaper's photo of Chuck intent on ending Mr. Randall L Smith's life.

There are times for silence.

To live as he did, Cuz needed to control information, to use it when it was the most powerful and to always keep his ultimate truth from others. Cuz knew, but no one knew he knew. The Gusano had come close, but Cuz gave him other things to think about.

In Cuz' experience, players can be wild, way beyond control. That can be interesting and sometimes difficult to deal with, like when Biggie brought the FBI into his living room.

"Sometimes good luck can kill you." Cuz said.

"Me? Nah," Biggie said.

"Wha'chu talking? FBI. I don't have to say more do I?"

"Get over it, Cuz. If you hadn't been a criminal, they would have petted your dog and gone away."

"Biggie, a player knows when the play is against him."

"Then what? Lie down? Die? Not this player."

"Time is the teacher. Youth is a denialist. Age is ..."

"Proof luck will save you, if anything can."

Cuz gave Biggie un abrazo and left the warehouse where he had given Biggie the only job Cuz could not do himself. Biggie had a secret he had kept from everyone but Cuz: Biggie loved E-Bay and had learned to make a living as an independent booster turning loot into money.

Biggie had a room about the size of two bathroom stalls and a smaller budget for a computer and internet. There was an entire warehouse of stuff of all kinds: guns, drugs, jewelry, expensive clothing, luxury cars and assorted 'valuables.' No one said 'stolen,' it was more like a pawn shop or a consignment. No questions. Cuz said go for it and Biggie started creating personalities, sock puppets, who would put things up for sale. He also set up straw bidders to get the prices he wanted. He hacked lurker programs so he could reset buy codes to match his needs.

He liked computers. When his father was killed his mother took a class and started learning how computers could help her life. She found E-Bay and she listened to President Bush say that she could be an E-Bay millionaire. He talked directly to her, right out of the TV, and she talked directly to Biggie. Within ten years she proved GWB to be right. Biggie learned and wandered to Florida to try it on his own.

Tio didn't get it. O.G.s have their M.O.s that they jealously guard from copycats. Tio couldn't change and would be replaced by Cyber-G's like Biggie. Biggie knew time was on his side.

Cuz figured he would pay for his escape from FBI prosecution with Biggie's profits from six months of operation. Biggie proved better than that. As the numbers showed, in six months with his cut, Biggie could buy Cuz out in cash. Cuz thought about it for a second and took the offer. No gunfire. No thuggery. They settled their deal at happy hour at the Pirate Cove Inn.

Tio and Cuz became equals except that Tio didn't see the retirement Cuz did. Cuz said Biggie had forced him out, though the 'force' was the money that made crime unnecessary.

"Tio, my friend, give your business to Biggie. He is magic. We can be old and happy, even before we are old. The young know tricks we never learned. We don't need to know how to dislocate a shoulder or shoot so the blood won't get on our coat sleeves or your shoes. We just needed to know Biggie. Do you catch me?"

"No, I don't. The young are going to fuck us up. We'll lose our edge; our retirement will be ripped from our hands. We cannot leave our future in the hands of the unscrupulous."

“Biggie is scrupleless.”

Tio Emil de Los Santos was getting old. He was so old no one used his real name anymore. When he was young, he dropped out of school rather than fight his classmates who made fun of his name. He couldn't remember how many of his tormentors he iced. He tried on various names to reflect on his villainy. A small gang war left him the leader of gangsters all younger than himself.

When he was Biggie's age everyone feared him. Now that the game had calmed down, everyone respected him. Absolutely no one razzed him about his name anymore. He had outlived them all.

“You know Cuz I respect you and I will take your advice. Gives me a good feeling.”

The garden, literally, comes up out of the ground. Every minute of sunshine forces the plants to leaf out, to gather energy from the sun. Every fruit tree wants fruit hanging from its limbs. Then there are the birds, the bees, the butterflies and the black flies.

That spring I watched the changes day to day, actually, more like minute to minute. I studied change. The new world was coming into being.

In two months, the girls would be back which meant another week-long visit with the two exes, not a bad thing in my view. Life was going to be different with two teenage girls – women – running around the place and doing all the things high school aged girls do. I shuddered at the thought.

“106, it will be fun. The girls are excited about the wedding. Let me see. They blogged a long story they wrote together about life with your predecessors. Listen to this:

When Peter arrived, Mom had been alone for five years. We were young. He was older than Mom, pretty cute, not dreamy. He left for reasons of his own. He must have had something else he had to do more valued than watch Mom garden.

Mom was alone again. We were selfish teenagers. We had her to ourselves. That was fine, but we all missed him, and his stuff was everywhere.

He came back. Now they are going to be married.

She calls him 106. There is a tattoo on the back of his neck that is the Chinese character for the way Mom loves him, something about bones and sinew.

Carl says Mom was waiting for the magic one to enter her life. He made us cry when he told us the story of the third floor. No matter how much Mom loved Carl he could feel her being drawn to another. It was a multiple-tissue cry storm.

No matter what; the wedding would be weird. Only how weird remained to be seen.

I was happy at last. No conspiracy. No threats. No enemy, except time, eating at my resolve to live despite everything.

Wendy had settled down. Gardening made her less and less thirsty until Florida was a distant memory no one cared to recall. We stopped buying rum or coke.

“Peter, should we get married for real?”

“Wendy I am surprised to hear you ask that. I had a similar thought but let it go in favor of contentment. I am glad we are married in the spirit. I am happy to be bonded with you. What more is there? A piece of paper?”

“I was thinking tax status.”

“This is how it begins. Each small step draws you more deeply into the big muddy.”

“How’s your book going?”

I knew she didn’t care, really. It was an entry point into my attention. She knew I was unraveling. I had hoped I would work out my angst, but I had not.

“Ah. Look. I liked you as the international criminal syndicate leader. I, of course, am myself. You become Dahlia – you know like the Black Dahlia – a movie, I think. Anyway you are the leader. I am the poor duped, burned out insider who comes upon you. You are descending a staircase wearing a flowing white gown.”

“Like our wedding?”

“Yeah. It is you.”

“I am guilty. You are chasing me. We take turns catching one another, then, I end up dead. No one ever solves the murder.”

“Yeah, but I am the prime suspect. I somehow evade discovery and escape to Argentina.”

“Too sentimental.”

“I am working the great grandma demographic.”

“Neither of them will like the book.”

Her fame made me jealous.

It was one thing to be ‘together’ for life and entirely another matter to both be writers, both increasingly narcissistic and living in worlds of imagination. I never knew whether we were talking to each other or interviewing one another. I suppose I could make less of this. It is, however, both a point of pride and a sign of trouble.

“Wendy? Is it true women set traps for men?”

“Are you talking about the third floor? The story is I built it as a trap for you, my imaginary last lover who would complete my creation of a rural lifestyle. If true, I succeeded, and more.”

“That was my argument, that my leaving left room for Northern Girl to become the epitome of a loving woman, waiting and then enjoying,” I said. “The wedding planning has pushed this into a new realm.”

“Are you upset? 106, you are. I can tell.” She put her hand on my shoulder. She was standing behind me while I sat reading comments on NorthernGirl.com. “I would tell you I love you, but that is not your problem. Something else is needed. Can you help?”

I started to cry; first tears, then all the rest of it until I had to lean back to keep the keyboard safe and leaned into her arms. Hugging may be better than sex. It’s shorter, if it doesn’t lead to sex. It might be all we get out of sex that stays with us even hours later.

“Wendy, I am jealous of your fame.”

“You are more famous.”

“You make more than I do.”

“106, you have gone too far. It’s time.”

“For what?”

“Come to earth. Be here with me, now. Enjoy the coming warmth. Be at peace, feel the happiness surrounding you.”

“Wendy, I don’t know what to say.”

Truthfully, I could tell her exactly how demented I was feeling. Biggie is a cyber-thug. I never could have imagined that. It was Biggie's deal. He developed his talents to take advantage of the opening he saw. I would say that he and I would sit in a bar or restaurant and share stories about how we came up and how different we were. It was already in the book. What wasn't in the book was how I was stuck in it. Some part of us seeks another, a missing twin.

"Wendy, I think you have a split personality."

"Nope. I am only me. I am not Wendy; the international criminal conspirator you imagine me to be."

"No. I hate it when you say that."

"You are a funny guy."

"Not me. You are talking about the other guy, Peter."

"Oh, I see. You are demonstrating the confusion you feel imagining your characters to be different, so everything is not autobiographical."

"Or worse, all art becomes autobiography. I can never be seen as different from my characters. It can be embarrassing."

"Is that why you hide?"

"Yes." I said.

Looking back, I revealed myself in a way I could no longer control.

In college I studied mathematics and art history. I focused on the European Projectivists, the Renaissance, the break with religious iconography and the near consequent abandonment of 'reality' in favor of impressionism.

The Dark Ages ended with the rediscovery of mathematical concepts showing three dimensions, space, on two dimensions, the canvas. Real to the eye – yet unreal to the mind.

By the time I graduated from college the intellectualization of this contrast had barely made it to my ears when the 60's began. It was life in the impressionist era, life in a painting of flowers and women in white dresses. The reality of our

political life was giving way to a new perception, one where the standards of morality had been destroyed by a disease of leadership that continues to this day. The ordinary person is less likely to be immoral than the powerful leaders who rule by the will of God.

But that is not the central point of Wendy's discovery.

She caught me in my confusion.

"106, let's say we can catch ourselves being normal. Would you want to stay normal?"

"Life is not a ball placed at the top of a hill, then set in motion, subjected to human perception of how motion works, how gravity works. There is no reason to believe anything. The descent into belief ends life as I know it. Our lives become little and predictable."

"So, I will put you down as No."

"I guess. Somewhere in the past, I missed a turn."

"Everyone went one way, and you went another?"

"We parted company. That is the territory for therapy. I sense some other territory. A sensual territory, not the mind, but where feeling matters more than mind, where what explains our behavior is the way we treat each other. Or, reflexively the way we feel we are being treated."

"Unstable."

"Things would be different." I said without giving any energy to examine the pain that would naturally come from such a change.

"106, people would suffer. Right now, it is just you suffering."

"Wendy, I am not suffering. I am insufferable. You have hit upon the problem. If we are too sensitive, take offense and empathy dies we may no longer be a successful species."

"106, you are a funny guy. Don't say it. I have heard your retort, but I don't fall for it. I know you. I have waited for you for going on a decade. I am not crazy. I see

you as a loving being, fit for the garden. I feel you wanting to finish this book. It hounds you. I can see it.”

Felicia looked into Biggie's eyes. "I see you in there. You are a woman's son. There is a softness within you like a nest for someone else's heart to dwell."

"You see all that?"

"Leonardo, I was an English major: creative writing. That's before Javier."

Biggie had not spent very much time thinking about a woman being attracted to him. He didn't consider his actions based upon a woman taking notice. He had been hard and abrupt. Not sexy. Abusive would work. Until he teamed up with the Pirate Cove Inn Sunset Happy Hour regulars, he had never recognized a use for another person in his life and now Felicia...

"Leonardo, I see you. I see my life and your life becoming our life. The Santero changed me. I do see our life now. I dream for three, not just two."

Biggie looked at her. He saw her looking at Leonardo.

"I have to go to work. I want to stop in for happy hour at the Pirate Cove Inn. Find a sitter and join me."

"Are you joking? 'Find a sitter.' Hmm. Maybe my poetry out paces my reality?" She said. "Biggie, maybe we need to throw down and tell our truths."

Biggie looked at her. He saw her looking at Biggie.

"Tonight. Cuz' cabbie will come for the two of you in time for sunset and dinner." Biggie said. "I can change my ways to make room for your heart next to mine."

"Leonardo, we will be happy, famously happy. Talk is necessary. Apurate."

"Mas tarde, mi Amor."

Biggie walked down the stairs behind his apartment building and realized how much better life had become because he paid attention to Felicia and Javier. He looked forward to dinner together.

When he rolled up to his office door, the SO was waiting.

"FBI gusano, how is selling out the people treating you?"

“I caught you. I know who you are.” The SO was looking ragged as the winter turned to spring and the temperatures and humidity were rising.

Something was on his mind.

The SO’s ex-wife called him Bill, but he preferred W. Lawrence Phillips. He hated being called Bill Phil. They had married in college and so she felt free to tease him where it hurt the most. That was her explanation not his. Of course, she had pretended to be pregnant to force him to marry her. She didn’t share much of her pregnancy with him until she never mentioned it again. He wondered where the whole thing went but he accepted that she had fooled him. That was his story. He filed for divorce telling her he was going undercover. She married one of her high school teachers: Chemistry.

“My name’s Larry.”

“What? I don’t want to know you.” Biggie said.

“I am at a career change moment.” The SO said. “Biggie, I have something you need. It will keep you safe and get you too rich to care about the FBI.”

“I am an honest business man. The FBI protects me from online theft. I support them.”

“You are selling stolen goods. You are using aliases. I have traced more than a dozen to your ISP which you try to suppress but fail to do so. You are traceable. I traced you. You can be untraceable.”

“Larry. I have never said your name before. It sounds friendly. Can we just do business? You are Mr. ...”

“Phillips. W. L. Phillips.”

“Wear different clothes, Mr Phillips. Those suits are like a uniform, you know that. I cannot be either friendly or business-ly with a suit.” Biggie sensed that something large had just started. He intended to hide from the worm. Yet the offer of safety was attractive.

“Slippery slope.” Biggie said.

“What?” Bill Phil said.

Wendy never showed anger. She could talk tough-ish. She might have cursed once in my presence. She never blamed me for things done or undone. She hummed quite a bit. She sang a little.

Her creative act, Northern Girl, drew huge interest for what it was: A blog with a personal focus. Her posts were positive attestations. I suppose there are millions of people quietly searching for a better world, one that makes more sense than the one on TV. These folks use the internet to find what they are looking for and thousands visit Northern Girl multiple times a day looking for what Wendy has for their pleasure.

“Wendy.”

“Yes, 106.”

“How’s the wedding planning going?”

“In the last hour, I received over one hundred emails. Yesterday there were over a thousand.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why you? Why now?”

“Well, I’d be guessing but I think life has become too expensive for most people to live. Lives are being led vicariously. Maybe Northern Girl’s life is one worth living and now she wants a big public wedding. If everyone is married, if the words mean respect and maybe mutual pleasure, then maybe they want to be married too.”

“Hmm. That might explain it. What do the emails say? Do any of them propose to you? Or ask to join the ceremony?”

“A large number want to be married in the same ceremony. Another big idea is that lots of people want to be the priest or minister or rabbi officiating.”

“Double hmm.” I said. “Have you hired a wedding planner? Sounds like a giant party is possible. Have you found a place yet?”

“Not yet. I am afraid of stopping this train, it might run me over.”

“How about looking for someone who does gigantic events, like Burning Man or the Olympics.”

“Hmm,” she said.

Tio and Cuz played canasta most every afternoon with two ladies who were very attentive to their needs.

“Tio, I want to thank you again for helping me in the life.” Cuz said. He checked his watch. “Ten more minutes. The ladies will be here.”

“My friend, Cuz, it has been my pleasure. My nephew has made our lives much easier. You didn’t kill him, and I thank you for that.”

“I don’t remember ever wanting to hurt him. Your friendship protected him in my eyes. Besides we married him. He’s happy.”

“Strange wedding. There were those other people.” Tio said.

“Yeah, the CIA guy and his gal, Wendy. I don’t remember his name.”

“Dick. No, Peter.”

“Gusano.”

“I think Gusano is that suit who popped you for the blow Biggie brought you.”

“What a joke. I saw him yesterday at happy hour. Where were you?”

“Cuz, I had a private meeting with my canasta partner. She is a masseuse. Very talented. Sorry I missed something?”

“Yeah, Biggie calls him SO, some FBI term. Anyway, he comes in wearing a Hawaiian shirt, like Biggie. They sit together. Have a few laughs. SO goes and Biggie makes the rounds until near sunset then his wife and kid come in and they eat. A nice family scene.”

“One big, happy family.”

“Yeah.” Said Cuz.

“Doesn't this seem strange? Like something is about to happen that'll surprise us all.”

“No.”

“Maybe you're wrong.”

“Wendy, I need your help.”

“Anything, 106.”

“Toleration of complexity. That is what it takes to get rich. Sound right?”

“I like simplicity. You don’t own a cell phone. You don’t have a Facebook page. You shouldn’t be rich.”

“Is simplicity the opposite of complexity? I guess I am looking for a way to describe a simple life.”

“No job. No car. No relationship. No assets? No appointments. How about health? I think I get it.” Wendy said. “Fifty years ago, the human mind maxed out its ability to deal with the complexity of life. Might have been TV. Time passed. Now cyber-minds exist to maximize the complexity, finding cracks in what is seamless to the human eye.”

I wanted to hug her.

“If someone can use computer power, they can tolerate complexity. His life gets simpler. He can do more.” I said.

“She does not work harder, yet she makes more since she can simplify the complex, and almost effortlessly,” she said. “106, are you interviewing me?”

“Hard to say. Biggie has a problem with complexity.”

“Will a computer help?”

“Too late.” I said. “But, you know, the complexity he is dealing with came from his using the computer to simplify things.”

“What is happening?”

“He has converted an FBI agent into a partner in a massive illegal scheme. Now he has his E-Bay world that the computer simplifies but the FBI...”

“So the question is ‘Can he tolerate this meta-complexity that no computer can deal with?’”

“Meta-complexity. Nice. Can I have it?”

“I was just quoting you.”

Biggie started to expand his office as he made room in the warehouse. He made room by making money. Bob and Chuck worked the stock looking for like items that could be sold in lots. As things sold and the rest was organized, walls were built, and offices opened. The offices all had computers and Bob and Chuck got desks.

Chuck, who Biggie described as having a killer instinct, became his chief assistant. E-Bay has a few issues for those with no computer experience. As Chuck showed, if you keep your finger on the trigger you can make a killing in E-Bay sales.

Biggie knew Chuck and his brother could be problems, so he decided to hire a running mate of Randy's.

It all started at happy hour.

Biggie had just had his second shot as the sun began to sink into the sea. Randy was idling in front of him, wiping down the bar. Biggie was the only customer: An odd night.

"Man I am swamped. I work, work, work. I need help."

"What do you need?"

"Enforcement."

"I know a guy. Lives outside of Sarasota. Has a concealed carry."

"A body guard. Does this guy..."

"Donny."

"Donny. Does Donny have priors? People after him? Does he have training?"

Randy listened carefully and kept his head going left to right.

"Nothing bad. Nothing good."

"Have Donny come around tomorrow."

"Can try," Randy said before greeting Bob and Chuck as they came into the bar.

"Shots!" Chuck said in too large a voice.

Bob raised his hand as if to quiet him, thought better about it, scratched his forehead.

“Rum,” he said.

Biggie moved from the bar to a table. Daddies don't have shots at happy hour, he thought.

He had changed his name back to his mother's maiden name to declare himself a de Los Santos. Leonardo de Los Santos, entrepreneur, employer, purveyor of fine goods, a taxpayer, a father, a husband, who really had it going on.

Felicia had decided to get pregnant again.

“You should have your own son.”

“I don't see it that way. Javi and I are tight like this,” he said holding up two fingers.

Felicia smiled and stroked his arm. “Mio, I want ...”

“Chica, I want you to be happy.”

“Chico, I want to be happy, too.”

Biggie couldn't help but wonder if what FBI Bill Phil said was true, that we tend to manipulate one another to meet our needs rather than to cooperate willingly.

“It is possible that with patience and a good attitude we will get what we need.”

“What's that? You saying yes?”

“Si, Señora. Si.”

Northern Girl was at its 90-day high for hits. ‘The wedding of the century. Everyone should come.’ That’s what her site said in large block letters.

She hired an artist who picked a site in Colorado. He saw a place where a circle as large as two miles across could be made. People holding hands and ‘Oming.’ There would be flags. It could be seen from space. Ministers from all over the world wanted to participate. I looked for Santero de los Torre on the list. No one by that name contacted her online.

I wondered if I would be needed for the wedding. Wendy had just had a breakthrough about the meta-importance of the wedding. Suddenly nothing was as it had been. Everything was categorized. By popular request, a new wrinkle was added to the plan. Others would be getting married simultaneously in a global online ceremony.

Suddenly, the blog hits were multiplied by ten as others began making suggestions about other venues and officiants. As the numbers blossomed, Wendy went from busy to unable to deal with her meta-complexity.

“What should I do?” she asked me one morning.

“Nothing. Set a time of day GMT and let it happen. Everyone will take care of their own complexities. Should be fun.”

The rules had changed. The Wedding was formalized. If you are in the circle or circles on the Wedding Day, you would be married by desire to as many people as you wanted. There would be husbands and there would be wives. Wendy was busier than ever before. I seemed extra. I always hid anyway, so I hid. She did not miss me.

Jim and Carl were there. They brought a film crew. It became a spectacle. But what of it? It was an event not to miss.

As the wedding unfolded on the appointed day, I found a road that crossed the ridge top to the west of the circles. The wedding was timed for sunset. I was on the hilltop and my shadow, cast across the plains below, stretched out across it all, across all the circles.

I married everyone. Now I needed names and addresses. Just kidding. I laughed. Biggie would have loved it.

Sophie and Dido were out there somewhere. Every time I saw Wendy, I saw them one on each side of her. They were living in the house again so next winter going to the Pirate Cove Inn would be a snap with the live-in house sitters.

After the wedding aftermath calmed down, we were alone again.

“What do you think?” she said.

“Think? I am a bit past thinking, more in the neighborhood of vegetation.”

“I saw you on the ridge. That was you wasn’t it?”

“Yup. I walked there and back in my wedding shoes. I don’t recommend it, if you have a choice.”

“You didn’t?”

“I know.”

“Who are you now? Biggie?”

“Probably. He hasn’t let me go all day. I should tell you about it.”

“I’ll read it when you’re done.”

I thought about starting my autobiography.

It wasn’t that I felt mortal and wanted to get a start on it. I was becoming overwhelmed by the complexity of my life. My memory was beginning to fail me. The past was becoming dim. Writer’s need to have a good memory for what their imagination fosters. A novel is 260 plus pages. It’s 50,000 to 75,000 words or more. It is recommended that a novel have a beginning, middle and end. Advice is to have an outline.

I hate advice. Imaginations demand freedom. Outlines demand discipline. My books were getting shorter and taking longer to read. My approach was to imagine until my memory failed and then stop, go back and fill-in, explain, show-don’t-tell. That is hard work and not imagining at all.

When I finished my silent rant, I realized my novels were shorter than other writers' which meant they had better memories than I and thus the need to start the autobiography. I wanted to call it A Study in Narcissism. It's all about me.

That's when I gave up on the project.

I can't remember what broke me out of my self-gratifying mood. I fell asleep? The phone rang? Like I said.

"106 wake up, the phone is for you. It's Leonardo."

"Leonardo?"

No one ever called me. I had no friends. I was not friendly.

"Yeah. Come on, Dude. We got married together," she said.

"Biggie."

"No, he isn't real. Leonardo is."

I lurched back into the present tense. I grabbed the phone. Who knows where this will go? Maybe I am bored and need an outlet.

"Leonardo, how are you? Great to hear your voice. How in the hell did you find me?"

"Internet. Glad it's you. This is my fifth call."

"What's going on?"

"We miss you. Want to be sure you're coming back down this winter."

"I'd like to."

"My family has a large house on the gulf shore. Big enough for all of us to get lost in. Felicia is pregnant and we'll have a son come November. We want you to hang with us."

I didn't know what to say, so we chatted about the weather, the job market. He complained about the Cubans, I complained about the difficulty of living with a

near legend, he exhibited no knowledge of Northern Girl. We had nothing in common.

“Look,” he said. “We don’t have a lot in common. Maybe nothing except we both were married during happy hour at the Pirate Cove Inn by the same ex-priest – Father what’s his name – at the same time.”

“I remember him. I don’t think he had a name. Wait. Father de la Torre comes to mind.”

“Oh, my God. You got it. Felicia and I did everything to find him. Glad I called you.”

He seemed impressed by my memory, but de la Torre was the Santero and he was supposed to be a character.

I considered a therapist or a guide who could help me in undisclosed ways.

That was when I decided to imagine a new character.

At the Pirate Cove Inn bar was a woman I did not know. She wasn't very attractive. Her hair was washed. She was dressed in her sparkly clothes, sequined and shiny. She wasn't ugly. She was depressed. Her age showed in her colors: grey and stern. She didn't look like fun.

It was my first day back in the Pirate Cove Inn. The summer had been long – too long for me. I craved the danger of Biggie's world, so he and I met up at the airport. He came to pick me up and take me to his hacienda as he called it. He had come up in the world, he told me, and he showed me his new home, his wife still pregnant with their almost son Leo. Javier had a gigantic train set he ignored in favor of a tablet and his MineCraft worlds. Javi didn't speak to me the first day.

Don't get me wrong. There was no way I was being honest with people. I had left Wendy in a huff because she was busy and only I wanted to find heat and wear Bermuda shorts. I was tired of the games she played to hide her true self. Biggie invited us down and I went alone. What the hell?

I wasn't looking for trouble. The woman at the bar wasn't trouble.

She was troubled.

There were moments in between sharp critical statements about faithfulness etc that I thought of myself in harsh ways, but my old spy ways were strong. I wanted to go undercover – with her.

That was when I realized I could be a novelist. I couldn't write, still can't. That is someone else's gig. But I was a spy. I spied. I had stories. On second thought, life in full view was too hard to imagine, so those stories were never going to be told.

The sequined woman sat at the corner of the bar with a tired looking younger woman just as happy hour began. I was there early. They were there earlier. They might have been lovers, but, like I said, they looked a bit worn by the times. They had hoped for love and found the usual. They did not look at me. I tried not to stare at them. What did I hope? What did they want that might involve me?

The sunset came and went in its eighteen-minute daily slot between cheap drinks and drinks. I really didn't want to know about their daily life, but there I was. There

they were. I checked their hands for rings. They each had half dozen on each hand, even thumb rings. As I checked them out for opportunities, I sensed I was missing something big. What sorrow lives in us that we do not recognize the beauty in one another? Just another question like so many.

I sat hoping my attention would be missed as I scanned the room looking for inspiration. The younger woman served my need of the moment. She was a wicked thing in my imagination. I saw her brow creased by her sorrows. I wished I was powerful enough to brush it smooth again.

My thoughts were crowded with desires. In the middle of my self-condemnation, she smiled at me. She was too drunk to focus at my distance, but I smiled back at her.

I remembered a novel I had just finished reading about a man and woman on a train daydreaming about becoming lovers. He sent her his silent pleadings for attention. She began to dream about a liaison. They parted without a word being said.

If it had been me, I could not write a different ending for myself and so it went. My imaginary lover became an imaginary ex-lover.

It took me a few more minutes to recognize what my attention had missed; a major item. There was something new about the Pirate Cove Inn – A piano bar, a nice one. Randy brought me another Rum and Coke.

“On me. Welcome back. A bit early, no?”

“I am alone. She’s coming in a week or so. Something about garlic and the Moon.” I said. “Nice piano bar.”

“Two months now we’ve had it. It has increased business. We don’t have the regulars this time of year. They’ll be back, but not for a few weeks yet.”

“Who’s the piano player?”

He turned and pointed to the end of the bar. “Two of them, Mildred and Missy, Blues singers. Hope you like them.”

He was pointing towards the sequined woman and her younger friend.

“I believe the blues part without hearing a note.” I said. “When do they play? It’s happy hour.”

“They are waiting for anyone else to walk in. They probably think you are a gusano so they will lay low.” Randy said as he wiped the bar in front of me.

“Can I say, F you in a friendly way, just so you know how hard it is to come back here?”

“The customer is always right, especially if he carries a knife.”

How did he know? Did he know my cousin? Maybe I talk too much.

A few hours earlier, across the island in his Cadillac, Biggie felt the power of his position run through him as his pride of possession, promised by his car's makers, came on in a rush of relaxation. He would have thought he had it all, but Felicia was out on the town hoping for a little fun. Tio and his canasta partner were sitting the kids.

As he turned onto 64, he remembered his Hog. He remembered his ride to the Pirate Cove Inn that introduced him to the Happy Hour Sunset Regulars. He pulled his foot back from the accelerator slouching down into his leather upholstery.

"Low rider drives a little slower. Low rider is a real goer."

The light ahead turned red.

"Hey."

Biggie thought about how fun it was to go from alone to family, friends and a future in the space of a year.

"No one died in the making of this film."

When he saw the water, he turned right.

"The Pirate Cove Inn. Home away from home. Nope. Just home." He started to laugh.

He drove by the Pirate Cove Inn.

"Looks too lonely."

Pulling a 180 he headed back towards 'The Hacienda.'

"Watch a football game. Have a beer. Go to bed early," he said to himself

When Felicia walked in he snorted himself awake. She threw her purse on the couch as she sat down on the chair across the coffee table from him.

"I had a blast. Girl talk is so needed."

"By girls."

“Yeah, by girls. What did you do?”

“Watched Football. Saw Detroit kick the bejesus out of the Marlins.”

“No, you didn’t. Marlins play baseball.”

“No wonder it was so easy.”

She got up laughing, went to the bathroom.

As she was walking back down the hall she started talking.

“Leonardo, did you look at the news about this big wedding in Colorado. It says over 200 ministers married more than 100,000 people in under ten minutes. What a hoot.”

“Think paperwork. What a nightmare.”

“Aw ah. I thought you’d like it.”

“Too complicated for me. Life is already harder than I’d like. What am I going to do with 50,000 new wives not to mention all those men? Who came up with that idea anyway?”

“Someone named Wendy from Northern Michigan. She has a website, Northern Girl. Trending very large.”

“I know a Wendy from Northern Michigan and so do you. We got married by the Santero at the same time. Wendy and Gusano.”

“Santero was not on the list of ministers. I checked. They called them officiants. Guy’s name was Peter, not gusano. I liked him.”

“Santero is not an officiant.”

“I think we should visit him and check out his scene. What do you say?”

“Felicia, I never asked you, but are you a Cuban?”

“Stop it, Leonardo. I am your wife no matter what. You afraid you married a communist or something?”

“I’ll get over it. When I first got here everyone was a Cuban. There are fewer and fewer every day. It’s a product of imagination, but with Cuz working with me I feel easier about it. Our wedding was a sign that I could forgive them at last.”

“Forgive them? What did they do to you?”

“It’s a long, sad story.”

“Not fair, Bozo.”

“Bozo?”

“A dead TV clown,” she said.

Biggie needed stimulation. He checked his watch.

“It’s happy hour”

“It’s always happy hour somewhere.”

“I am in the Here and Now.”

“You are a funny guy.”

“No. I am too serious.”

“Then let’s go get the Santero and buy him dinner at the Pirate Cove Inn.”

Nothing happened during weeks and weeks of the summer. The dog daze we called it. We pretty much laid around until the sun was gone, ate and laid around some more. We had almost stopped paying attention and things we hadn't considered changing were changing without permission.

"Aging. Don't worry." Wendy was number one wife of my 50,000. She cared about all of me and when things didn't work, she fixed them if she could. "More rest."

"Maybe I should start drinking."

"My thoughts exactly. The cold will start soon. The garlic is in the ground, the girls have control of the whole thing here. Payments are on automatic. Chimney is clean. We can go south to see Leonardo and family."

I picked up my laptop, carefully placing it in its carrying case. "Now is a good time."

"I am already packed. Car's oiled, gassed and loaded to go." She said. "All but you."

Reprises are not always so much fun. Unlike the first trip south I brought poetry: C.K. Willams. She brought mysteries. Who could have guessed?

No matter, I couldn't stop thinking about the beauties of Florida. Leonardo and Felicia would be fun to see. We didn't know much about one another. I couldn't help but wonder what funny stuff would happen this winter.

We were several weeks early this year. There was no need to wait until misery set in. Anyone with half a mind knew the cold was coming.

"Hey, hon, what was the Pirate Cove Inn's bartender's name?"

"Well, Wendy, I heard some people call him Raul. Most used Randy."

"Randy. That's it. What's his story?"

"Let's find out. Maybe he's worth 5,000 words."

“Randy, did I tell you I hate the gusano thing. FYI.” I said.

“Señor Peter, my bad. You may be taking the term too literally. But my bad, in any case.”

The doors opened and we all turned our heads. The two women and Randy looked at who was coming in, but I wanted to see the women sing and play, so I checked them to see if this was the moment for them to leap into action.

“Wow. Just wow.” Randy said towards my ear, and I turned to see Biggie and Felicia come past me and behind them the Santero himself dressed in his blue and white Marlin windbreaker.

“Peter.” Biggie said. “Santero is here with us. It’s dinner. Peter, are you ready yet? Join us.”

“Leonardo, Felicia, where are the kids?”

“Tio’s. Santero, you remember Peter. He married Wendy in the same ceremony as ours.”

Santero looked at me, deep into my eyes, seeking evidence of the effect of his ceremony on me, or maybe recognition of my soul. He saw something.

“I remember you. They called you gusano, but you are just a confused boy,” he said.

I thought the Santero only spoke Yoruba and a few words of English and Spanish.

“Wait a minute. I thought you only spoke Yoruba,” I said.

“Let’s sit and order drinks,” Biggie led us to his table and we four sat.

The Santero sat next to me. He put his hand on my arm. It was light as a feather.

“Peter, your true name is Peter? The liturgy’s language is Yoruba or a dialect of Yoruba. It’s an old religion, Santeria, and I have lived in it most of my life.”

Santero spoke with sincerity. “What is your faith?”

“Santero, I have no faith, only experiences I hope I do not repeat.”

He laughed modestly, reached into his shirt and pulled out a number of ornate necklaces that he pulled over his head and placed in his jacket pocket.

“Now, a rum and coke for me please, Señor Leonardo.”

“Santero, ...” Biggie said.

“Call me Carlos, please. I am off duty.”

“Carlos, it would be my pleasure to bring one to you personally,” Biggie said and made the walk to the bar.

I was mystified. Things had changed since I left in the late winter. The Santero spoke English better than I did. Leonardo was rolling in it. I was not a gusano or a rogue agent.

Deep in thought I had taken my eyes from the blues singers.

The piano player’s first note was a tear rolling down a cheek. The singer was a three-instrument beat-box. Almost as soon as I noticed they were performing, their first song ended and the second started with a loud upbeat piano riff, then the voice began.

It was as if the fog parted.

“Carlos, I need to believe in something.”

“Peter, believe in yourself, in your goodness.”

“What happened to you? How did you get here?”

“It is a long and sad story. Do you want to hear it or listen to the wild voices of the singers?”

He was right. I didn’t answer because he seemed to know my answer. We ordered and ate. The music proceeded on and off for the two hours we were there together. In between sets Carlos told me his story or the parts he wanted to tell in the time he had.

“Carlos, that wasn’t so sad.”

“Amigo, I left a few parts out for later.”

“The best shall be last.”

“It’s a storyteller thing.”

The Santero stood and walked to the piano bar. He whispered in the older woman’s ear and she into her younger friend’s ear, then the music began to make sense.

I would not dare to attempt describing the sounds they made. Nor could I usefully tell you about the dance. Carlos played a small drum he took from his jacket. Mildred and her young accompanist Missy played piano, sang and danced. Fever is the only word I would use. They looked as if they had been a band forever.

The song ended. Carlos abraozed the women who looked at him as a revered figure. He walked back to the table, waved for Raul to bring a round.

“Peter, did you hear the rest of my story, the sad part, the part about Africa and the kidnappings, about impoverishment, where we had been rich, we were suddenly poor and grieving? I sometimes ache with anger for what happened to my ancestors and more for the arrogance of those who benefit today from those crimes.”

“Carlos, I did not hear defeat in your song, your song was amazing – a triumph.”

“Art disguises the scent of blood.”

Carlos finished his drink. He put on his Marlin jacket with the Eleke necklaces in its pocket.

He said goodbye to me and everyone in a personal way speaking a language I did not understand.

Biggie and Felicia left with him which left me sitting at the bar alone. The older singer, Mildred, came over and sat next to me. She looked livelier than she had.

“Mildred,” she said. “Are you buying?”

“Are you talking? Randy, the lady would like a drink,” I said. “Peter.”

“Peter, nice to meet you. I hope you aren’t a writer.”

“Why?” I said.

“The old man whispered into my ear, ‘tell him not to write my story.’ I think he does not like books. He reads, does not write. He loves singing and playing music especially when he has taken his Elekes off and becomes Carlos.”

“How long have you known him.”

“Would you believe he is my father? He is either way. I adore him. I sing for him.” She spoke in her true voice, the young voice of a daughter. “How about you? You knew him before today.”

“I met him when he married Leonardo and Felicia.”

“He married you, too, at the same time.”

“Yes, how did you know?”

“Tio told me. He warned me about you. He didn’t think you were very committed and if you came back you might want to hit on me.”

“Do you want me to hit on you?”

“I want to play and sing. Thank you for the drink.”

As she walked away, I watched her leave. The scent of her, of sweat and age left me wondering at my own intentions.

Something real was about to happen and for some reason I had no clue what it was.

At Bradenton, Wendy turned right on Hwy 64 and drove straight to the Pirate Cove Inn.

“I am starving,” she said. We climbed out of the Mercedes, saw ourselves walking together up to the glass doors. We turned and smiled to each other, a knowing smile. We had arrived.

Randy waved as we made our way to our table.

“The usual?”

“Yes,” we said.

“Wendy, it feels a little like home.”

Randy brought the rum and cokes and a menu for dinner. Something had changed.

“A piano bar,” Wendy said.

Standing near the piano preparing to begin was the singer and her accompanist.

“Wow. Entertainment. What a hoot,” I said.

“Good evening, Pirate Cove Inn. Marla Davis here from the great State of Michigan, from Motown and the Blues Network with me is Danny Hoyt who has played with me for eleven years next week.”

There was some applause and a hoot. Only Wendy and I clapped. The hoot came from the guy from the other 30 something couple. We were early in the year for most of the seasonal tourists. Happy hour was over. It was late even for dinner. As we stopped clapping the guy stood and left. I couldn't remember if we had ever met. I don't remember him at the wedding.

“I want to dedicate my next song to someone I have never met, a woman of great strength who exemplifies the meaning of blues and the battle of the sexes. The song is called ‘106’ and the lyrics are the words of Northern Girl.”

As the piano and her voice took over the audible space in the room, Wendy and I sat with our mouths open staring at one another in a combination of disbelief and shock. Randy came to get our food order.

We listened to Marla's song with Wendy's words. It was a wonderful surprise. It ended and the music went in other directions. We ate. The music set ended and as we were the only people in the room Marla walked to our table to greet us and thank us for being her audience.

Wendy grabbed her hand and pulled her into the chair between us.

"Would you like to join us?" Wendy asked.

"Ah."

"My name is Wendy Homesteader. This is the one and only 106."

"Oh, my gawd. No way."

"Way." Wendy said. "How? I don't know. Luck, I guess."

"Northern Girl is a work of art. I hope you don't mind too much I stole your words. They are pure blues that needed to be sung," Marla said. "Did you like it?"

"I did. Your voice and my words were wonderful together," Wendy smiled.

They rose, the two women and hugged in an embrace that had meanings I could only guess at.

If someone had stolen my words, I would have stood up and taken a swing. Wendy took it as a compliment. Since Marla gave her credit maybe the hug was exactly what was needed.

Marla and 106 the song would change my life.

Biggie was in the house. He and Felicia had needed space, as he put it later, which means he had run out of patience with home life and wanted to feel the adrenaline of La Vida at the Pirate Cove Inn. When he walked through the door, alone, he had the Brass Balls I knew from our first encounter. I really did have training in threat identification, and he hit 80% in the probability that violence would ensue within 24 hours.

I was lonely because Wendy hadn't arrived yet. She told me she would fly down, soon.

Biggie said, yesterday, that he would pick her up whenever she arrived. He offered that I could go if I wanted to tag along. The conversation had been punctuated with 'gusanos' and a chuckle that made him appear a little crazy. How could he not be crazy? I chuckled.

"What are you laughing at Gusano?" he asked.

"Life is funny, my friend."

"True, but if that were all you were thinking you would laugh all the time."

"Sorry, I was thinking how impossible it is to believe that you are not crazy."

"Crazy is a term of art. Peter, words are dangerous things, misused and emotions can go wild without understanding. ¿Me oyes, Gusano?" Biggie looked at me. I say 'at me' meaning like a gun looks at a target.

"Biggie have you ever felt like picking a fight with someone just to whip his ass?"

"It's a man thing. If you do not fight you cannot win, if you do not win who would want to follow you, if no one followed you, then where would you be? Following someone else, that's where." He continued looking at me in that way, until he couldn't take it anymore. My will defeated his.

I turned away from his defeat and waved at Randy, "Shot's" and waved to the empty chairs and, of course, Mildred and Missy.

"Well, Biggie, I have a feeling something is about to happen. I can't tell you what and I can't tell you when, but the time is ripe. You know, like you're reading a book,

the characters have become their own persons, there is an uneasy feeling about halfway through. It's like the writer loses control and you can sense it."

"Gusano, you are one funny guy. For your information 'funny' in this context means 'weird.'"

Just then, the doors swung open and Tio's entourage entered. The last time I saw him he had two bodyguards.

He had retired on a 'gift from God' as he called his technologically adept nephew sitting next to me. Tio no longer dwelt in a secrecy that demanded solitude. His group of followers had grown to include Cuz, Bob, Chuck, and Cuz' unidentified canasta partner, the female companion who fawned on him. Mildred and Missy rose from the bar and moved to the piano and began organizing themselves once more. Two limo drivers walked into the kitchen for their dinner.

"Raul," Tio roared above the sounds of his entourage entering. "Let happy hour begin."

Why had I not seen this before? Tio owned the Pirate Cove Inn. Raul was his son. Cuz, Bob, Chuck, Missy, Mildred; they were his crew. I regretted giving up on writing my own story, giving up writing period. It is scary work, opening yourself to others that way, in writing, unmistakably black and white. When I decided 'not me' I felt at ease. I had no reason to stay in that house with all Wendy's memories. I didn't need solitude. I needed action. Biggie is where the action is. I am with Biggie and now his uncle. Tio walked up to us.

"Peter, Leonardo, it is good to see you. Tonight is on me," Tio said, laying his hand on his nephew's shoulder. "Raul, everything for everyone is on my tab. I have received great news and I want to share my fortune with all of you."

"Si, Señor Emil."

"Raul, hijo, call me Papa tonight. The curtain is down for a party."

"Tio Emil," Leonardo said. "What is your great fortune?"

"Time. Let us eat and bid the Sun good night. Cuz, would you find Santero Carlos?"

Cuz and a bodyguard left at this command. Raul took drink orders. 'The usual' was the norm. Tio ordered a Cuba Libre on the rocks. It was a hint everyone except Biggie missed.

Food was ordered. Biggie ordered fish tacos. Tio ordered Pescado Asado.

Biggie grew agitated. The food arrived after two more drinks.

"Uncle."

"Yes, Nephew."

"I am worried that there is something I do not know of which I am about to become aware and that it will surprise me."

"Your father was murdered in prison. Your mother was too proud to tell me you needed a father to replace him, may his soul rest in heaven. I am your father now."

"I don't need a father," Biggie said in a larger than necessary voice.

"Sit with me. I have much to tell you about your mother and blood father. It is a long sad story. Calmate, por favor, hijo." Tio looked hard at Biggie, hoping to see Leonardo.

Tio waited until Cuz returned with Carlos, until the food was consumed, and the voices of his companions were mellowed by the sunset and the softness that the starry sky laid upon us.

"Peter, life can be short, we might not have time to do everything we imagine. When I looked down at my hands becoming the hands of an old man, I decided aging had to be a gift. This gift gave me time to consider how much I miss what I have not seen as an adult: Cuba."

Tio ordered rounds for everyone. Raul, the good son, obeyed. The revelers toasted Tio, Señor Emil de Los Santos, their patron and friend. They toasted Biggie for the 'rain' he brought with him from the West Coast.

Tio asked Carlos to say a prayer for clarity. Carlos rose.

“Señor de Los Santos, I am off duty as Santero, but as Carlos I can offer a human blessing from one to another that there be peace in our lives and in our homes. We can hope our choices bring the peace we all seek.”

When Carlos was finished, he simply sat down.

Tio remained on his feet. He raised his glass. “To Cuba, my home, and to you, my homies.”

Everyone drank to his toast.

Biggie was still agitated, but his brain was in action.

“Tio, Papa.”

“Que quieres?”

“You are Cuban?”

“That is true. Your mother is Cuban, my mother, father, both Cuban.”

“My mother is Cuban?” Biggie stood up from the table and as if unintended he turned as if to go continued turning until he was back as he began and sat down again. “I am Cuban?”

“Half. Your father was Jamaican and a beautiful man who you were robbed of knowing.”

“Papa? I am my mother’s child. That I must accept.”

“Nino, what did you think you were?”

“Aztlán.” Biggie said. “It’s a west coast thing.”

“But you were born in Miami,” Tio said. “Let’s start again. Señor Carlos, another prayer, por favor.”

“Señor de los Santos. Oyeme, we are grateful for life. We thrive in the garden the force of creation has brought us to. We have an abundance. We ask for harmony, not from a God we have never seen but from each other. Help us Brother and Sister to find harmony, a gift you alone can give another.”

Tio rose once more.

“Amigos, I have another surprise.”

As Marla and Wendy stood hugging, Marla was whispering in her ear. I watched a secret go from one to the other.

As Marla whispered, Wendy's face became more mobile than usual changing from attentive to greatly excited.

"What?" she said. "No way?"

"Way," Marla said. "I can show you the email."

"What?" I asked. "I want to know, too."

"I, Northern Girl aka Wendy Homesteader, gardener and blogger, am invited to join Marla Davis, accomplished blues singer, on a local AM radio morning show that is showcasing her blues singing and the upcoming TV movie that features the growingly popular song '106.'"

I hoped my face did not betray my inner thoughts. Jealousy is a terrible thing to have. It is worse if you are caught at it.

"That's nice," I said.

"Nice? Just nice? Why not wonderful or fabulous?" she asked. "Ah, you wish it were you. But it is the next best thing, it's me ... and Marla, who you have to love and be happy for."

"It is just radio," I answered.

"But it is a Grammy nomination," Marla said.

Wendy jumped and clapped her hands. I slid back and down in my chair. Marla leaned over and grabbed my hands pulling me up, to end my loneliness.

"Come on, 106, it is all about you." She said to me as her lips found my ear. "I hope you know I love you, if you are who Northern Girl says you are."

Inspired I pulled her to me, and she was right. Wendy pushed herself into our hug and the three of us stood there giggling at our good fortune.

There is nothing simple in life. There are moments we remember in our own way. Someday, we would sit together again and recall that day when fate rearranged our

lives into a form more artful than necessary. I would have settled for contentment. Instead, I found fame and, in a way, that I never suspected would happen. How could I have?

“Cuz and I are going to lead a cruise to Cuba so Leonardo, Felicia, and Javi can re-discover their roots” Tio stood before his crew. “Two weeks of sun and Cuba and everyone here goes on my dime. A two-week party of joy-for-life. We leave in five days for Barbados. Arrange your lives accordingly.”

I knew I could not go without risking my US residency. It was at times like these that I needed Wendy near me, to stay with me, but I had left her behind. Maybe the invitation to Tio’s trip would make up for it.

Biggie was having problems. The first announcement hit him like a ton. Felicia was nowhere near. He missed her. Maybe that’s projection, if it is, I like it.

“Tio... Papa, I am happy you will visit your home with your homies,” Biggie said. He spoke to his tio’s ears alone.

“You will come.” Tio did not order him to come. He begged him to join him in a journey to define their relationship. I was sitting between them. They were literally talking behind my back. I could not understand what they said. They spoke Spanish. I felt them negotiate a continuing peace between them.

“To please you, Tio, Papa, like a good son.”

“That makes me proud of you, to know that you are proud to be my blood.” Tio said. “I have a feeling that you need to know who you are and where your grandparents are buried. Cuba is a world all its own and you are part of it, part of a diaspora that broke families apart. We can return to visit. We owe it to each other to make the journey.”

“I am your blood. I am Cuban. My future is a Cuban future.” Leonardo was in the house, Leonardo de Los Santos.

One radio appearance became a growing trend.

Marla and Wendy became the chocolate and vanilla sisters, though no one called them that. Wendy started singing with her. I sat and wrote most days, while Wendy and Marla sat at the piano at the Pirate Cove Inn.

Wendy headed back to the condo while I decided to stay. We kissed goodnight.

After happy hour, Marla and her piano player took their places. The mood of reverie, such as it had been, turned introspective.

I know nothing about the South. Country Western and the Blues, Gospel and Jazz: I can say the words, but no words I can say will tell you what it is. Not from what I've heard of the Blues.

“Leonardo, life is getting stranger and stranger. Last week I hadn't listened to music in who knows how long and now it's the Blues that have me hummin'.”

“106, don't make shit up.” He said. “106, should I call you that or do you go by ‘Peter.’”

“106 is what I am used to hearing. Have you heard Marla's song ‘106’? The one that has a Grammy nomination?”

“Oh. Yeah. Is that what she's saying? I thought she was saying someone was sick.”

“Good one. I see your point,” I said. “How's Felicia doing? Baby good?”

“Fatherhood is not what I thought it would be. It's harder.” Leonardo's voice trailed off. No sleep will do that to your mind.

“Tired.”

“What's worse than tired but not quite dead yet?”

“Ouch.”

“I was driving to work this morning and fell asleep at a light.”

“How long will this go on?”

“Tio says maybe five years. It has its rewards. I have lots of dreams.”

“That’s good. I guess. I have no kids of my own. Wendy’s are adults. I missed a boat or something.”

Within minutes of each other the brothers, the Cuban and the uncle entered the Pirate Cove Inn. Leonardo’s Uncle Emil ordered a round for the house. The bar was almost full once they all sat down. The uncle was moving down the bar talking to each person. Done, he put a few folded bills into Marla’s tip jar and took one of the three seats in front of the piano.

When her song was finished, she leaned over to talk to Emil. He whispered. She stood back with a hearty guffaw, patted his hand. She leaned over and whispered to Danny. He began to play. She sang the Cuban National anthem with all the gusto she sang any other song.

Cuban history is not my strong suit. People in the Pirate Cove Inn were caught in the plaintive strains, tears filled some eyes. The song ended and the crowd went wild – all ten of us. Fists were raised. I heard words in Spanish that were not translatable into high school English.

Emil stood and walked back along the bar, once more saying something personal to each person seated there.

“Peter,” he said to me. “See I do remember your name from the wedding. You are family, even if you don’t look it. Same for Wendy. Where is Wendy?”

“She gave up before you came in. Thanks for the family thing. I feel like one already, thanks to your Nephew.”

“He is a good one. He makes me feel secure as I enter retirement. He is *the* future and *my* future. Know what I mean?”

“I have no living relatives,” I said. He put his hand on my arm.

“Call me Tio.”

“Call me 106.”

“Que me dices?”

“It’s a number. 106.”

“Where did you get a number for a name? Wait. Save it we’ll have lots of time later.”

“When?”

“Hold on.” Emil stepped back from the bar and hollered. “A toast.”

The bar became a hive as drinks were replenished.

“OK. Ready. OK. My family, I have an announcement.”

A buzz moved through the room.

“We are going to Havana. We leave the day after tomorrow. I will give you details in a few hours. No one stays here. Raul, you too, Señor. The Pirate Cove Inn goes on the road.” His hand remained in the air. “To adventure!”

“To adventure!” replied the chorus.

Biggie had been almost entirely transformed from a young gangster into a successful entrepreneur. His clothing was the same, however. Their new home was built in the Hawaiian style with lanais: thatched roofs over balconies and patios. On the sand it could have been Maui instead of Anne Marie Island.

“Mi amor, let’s go to Hawaii.”

“Why? Don’t we have it all here?”

“And hurricanes and crazy people. Aloha is the way to go.”

“How do you know?”

“The guy I buy my shirts from online. He sends out newsletters. We should go. There are bad things, yet there is something really cool.”

“We have surfers here. We have air conditioning.”

“Bikinis. Fishing. Islands. But no aloha,” Leonardo said in that sweet Leonardo way Felicia loved. “When we get back from Havana I will get our trip arranged. It is a long way from here.”

“Let’s go later, March, so I can get my body back in shape. Birthing is fun and then it’s work and workout. I get the work. Not yet the workout. I bought a membership at the gym. They call it a club, Club Slim.”

Biggie had a problem he was wrestling with. He had hired Donny to watch his back. Donny was going to Cuba with the family, even though, he didn’t know him very well.

Donny was a youngster, with all the youngster energy Biggie had, without a sign he had been schooled in how the Game worked.

“I have a lunch with Donny so we can go over the rules. Then he will be here most days to cover the security at the casa.” Biggie said. “I’ll bring him around when Javi is home from pre-school.”

“I’m looking at you and thinking you have been eating very well. Maybe I’ll get you a membership at the club, too.”

“It looks good in Hawaii. It’s an Aloha thing.”

“Nah. Tight is sexy.”

“No one cares is Aloha?” Biggie asked.

“Everyone cares about everyone, but it is cool to go almost naked no matter what. There is more but at least we can all be free in the sun and waves.”

“The Blues is not a way of life. My life is not blue, my music is the blues. There is a difference.” Missy said.

I didn't know the difference between being blue and having the blues. She was far beyond me.

“Tears are from sadness or joy or something else more difficult to describe. The Blues is not about crying. Blues is part anger.”

“Huh?”

“Like James said, when the anger comes in him, there's no place for a man to hide.”

Missy was sipping what looked like water. I had ordered the usual and was holding it between my hands watching the ice melt.

“Peter, you are a cute guy. You could do something with your life. I watch you waiting for Wendy and wonder. It's not you and Wendy I wonder about. I wonder how you spend your time.” Missy tilted her head as she spoke.

“I left Michigan before it got very cold. I wanted action.”

“Anne Maria Island is not action to me though I perform here.”

“Tio and Biggie add up to action for me.”

“Honey, these boys are retiring. Hell, I am retiring,” Missy said.

She was talking to her drink. I was watching her in the Pirate Cove Inn bar mirror. Her eyes raised up to see mine seeing her.

“Look at you. Sitting next to a woman almost twice your age, drinking rum before sundown.”

“Do I look happy?”

“Not yet, honey, but in ten minutes happy hour will begin, which means, I guess, that you will be happy then. Can you wait?” Missy laughed. I had not heard her laugh before.

Missy was no threat. She had a warm manner, not mocking. She told me she watched the single men in the bar out of habit. It had become her way of telling if she was putting enough out in her music or whether the singles couldn't hear her, feel her. I felt her even though I wasn't made for the Blues.

"I have been singing most of my life, may as well say all my life." She went on to recount the female blues singers who influenced her. I wish I could remember the names. I was listening to her. I heard her voice but not her words.

"You should write a book," I said.

"You are a funny guy."

"No, really. ..."

"Peter, writing it down won't be as good as telling the stories over and over. Besides if I write it down someone would remember that Bessy Mae died at sixteen, ten years before I could have heard her. It would bring me no peace." She stared into her drink.

Randy came up to us and said, happy hour is officially started. Missy ordered a Mountain Dew. I hadn't taken a sip of mine and said, later for me.

"Missy, what keeps you going? What makes a blues singer tick?"

"Ah. Wouldn't you like to know?" She slapped the bar top and let out a hoot, getting more humor from her retort than I did. "You writing a book or something?"

"Nah, not me." I sounded convinced. "I would never write about you. Everything I have ever written has been about me."

She laughed her best most infectious laugh. I joined her.

It was then that I decided to solve the murders of Randall L and Harriet Smith. The book would not be a novel. It would be a documentary of my search for the murderer. The question in my mind was 'How will he be found?' and now I knew the answer. I would go back to Canada to rest, and then fly to Barbados on my Canadian passport to join the cruise. With that behind me, I would focus myself completely on justice for the Smiths.

During happy hour Wendy called. Randy had told her about the evening's news. She was headed south by car.

"The German car is running fine. I'll get in late tonight. Are you going to Cuba, Hon?"

"You know what that would mean? I have to leave the States, return to Quebec and get a visa for Barbados and beyond."

"Do it. No matter what. I have friends with a large sailing craft, we can join them in Quebec City and sail into Grand Traverse Bay, in the summer it could be a wonderful journey."

When she arrived at 1 a.m., I was waiting up for her. She walked through the door to the condo carrying a bottle of Champagne and a crate of red raspberries. As usual I felt her deep within me, like I had been missing a part of me. Maybe Missy was right. I had been waiting and maybe now I could rise above everything that had fallen apart in my career.

"Peter, did I ever miss you." She ran towards me, raspberries scattering here and there. I grabbed the bottle, the berries she dropped at her feet and in a grip as strong as I have ever felt she pulled my head down to hers. "I am so glad to be here. The Pirate Cove Inn is still open, and I am thirsty."

"What about this?" I raised the bottle up.

"All that's for morning when we can use it best. I am tired and have tasted rum in my imagination for the last 300 miles."

"Sure. Let's go."

The Pirate Cove Inn was a late-night scene now that the piano bar was The Blues spot on the Island. Mildred, Missy and Carlos were knocking them dead. When we reached the bar, Randy excitedly brought us the usual.

"On me. Welcome home, Wendy. We have been waiting for you. You are in time for the return."

"The return? It sounds adventurous."

“Tio says we go. We go.” Randy wiped the bar in front of us then abruptly left to answer someone else’s need.

In the morning I found a flight to YQB. Wendy and I parted poorly. The Champagne and fruit had topped the Rum and Coke which came from a long night at the Pirate Cove Inn that had followed her arrival. We argued, with me accusing her of being a criminal. I pointed to her sailing buddies who she offered up to smuggle me across an International Border, making her a leader of an International Criminal Conspiracy She was still clinging to her ‘innocent’ plea. The facts showed otherwise.

Yes, I had left the career I had chosen for myself in order to follow her, to be her lover and almost husband. I had no income. My job was terminated when I stopped working. Not hard to figure. There it was.

Nonetheless, Wendy and I were a unit. Bonded. I wanted something she had and she, something I had. I had to think back to find the reasons. She took me in when I needed help. I fell for her immediately and it was only then my cover story started to unravel.

I flew to Barbados landing hours before the cruise set sail. It wasn’t difficult to find Wendy once I was onboard. I followed the signs to the bar and there she was sitting with Carlos. They were deep in conversation. I left them there without disturbing them and went in search of my accommodations.

I wasn’t carrying that much stuff: two small bags with clothes and some paperwork. Time on a cruise can weigh heavily and the choices were the same as ever. If I kept my mind busy, I would drink less, which I considered a good goal.

My cabin was a single that had an internal door into Wendy’s. I opened the table in mine and laid out the work I would do while sailing along. Of course, I brought the murder file. I was fascinated by the question I had asked. How will they catch him?

My past efforts with the ‘Randall L and Harriet Smith murder file’ as I called it, had yielded an eerie picture of the killer. The newspaper was kind enough to email their original photo file as sent to them by the police. Using my computer, I had produced the best enhanced and sized photo of the man. I encased a printed copy

in a non-reflective glassine envelope and taped it to the front of the binder in which all the other documents were stored.

On the front of the photo cover I wrote 'The Killer' in permanent black sharpie. When I looked at him, I could swear I had seen him somewhere some time ago. I had had that feeling on a number of occasions before, my failure to put my finger on it, dulled my hope. That was why I made the photo cover for quick viewing.

Once my stuff was stowed, I headed back to the bar and Wendy. I neared the table realizing that everyone was there with her. As I walked up a small round of applause announced that we were all ready to go. The movements of the boat made my thoughts about a beer disappear, while I normalized my sense of motion.

The trip would take three days to Havana, one day on land and three days back to Barbados. Pacing oneself was essential. My resolve didn't last long.

"You are here!" Wendy said. "I thought I wouldn't see you. I'm so excited."

"It is good to be here. I just made it on board in time." I said.

Wendy was hanging from my shoulders and neck. Her arms encircled me. There are moments when time should stop. Being hugged by Wendy surrounded by friends on the party deck of a small cruiser with the sun shining off the glass-like deep blue sea was such a moment. Time did not stop.

Drinks were ordered as I shook hands with Cuz, Missy, and the canasta partners whose names evade me. Felicia and Leonardo were there. Tio, Chuck and Bob sat apart. He was teaching the brothers a Cuban card game. Chuck looked electric with bold tattoos and a shaved head over a long beard. If I hadn't known him over the last year I would have never recognized him. Bob was always the same: a polo shirt and khaki pants, penny loafers without socks.

Tio was his ever-gracious self. He was covering the costs of the boat, the food and the partying. He announced it as we left the dock.

"I am proud – and for me, for a Cuban returning home at long last, that is a big thing – I am proud to bring you, my friends, family, and business associates on this most important journey."

“What’s in it for you besides pride?” Chuck asked.

Tio turned to face him.

“Chuck, you have a way with words,” Tio answered. “Let’s face it. This trip with you will cost me dearly. Think about it. You are everyone I ever talk to anymore. So, bottom line, who am I going to tell stories of our adventure to? Not you.”

Even Chuck saw the humor in Tio’s answer.

Carlos, the off-duty Santero, stood and pointed to his daughter Mildred.

“Let’s play and sing. We, too, are going home. First, I have a small human prayer to the power that is greater than us, to protect us from adversity, to give us blessings beyond what we deserve, and to elevate us to be better than we have any right to expect to be.”

With that the very gnarly old man and his bluesy daughter walked to the piano bar holding hands, whispering to each other. Then they began to play and sing.

Their music lifted the spirits of Tio’s entourage. The night went on as if it would never end.

Tio’s friends enjoyed sitting around the bar from the time of departure until the staff begged to close the bar. Everyone I knew from Florida was there including my onetime SO, Bill Phil. He and Biggie were inseparable, haircuts, Hawaiian shirts, Kaki shorts, small tattoos on the base of their necks. SO was almost a foot taller, but Biggie had the power. That was obvious.

“Biggie,” I said. “What’s with the tattoo.”

“Huh?” he asked “You have one. What does it say? ‘If found please return to Wendy?’”

“Is that what she told you? I don’t think she ever told me what it said. I was hoping for something else.”

“OK Peter. Mine is the E-Bay logo. So’s Larry’s. We are a team.”

“Who’s Larry?”

“Bill Phil.”

“Him? Watch out for him.”

“I know. He is crazy but not so crazy he didn’t catch on that he was a tool of the business elite, destined to die in a lonely gun battle with some gusano.”

“Now he is what? A Cuban hero?”

“Maybe. We’ll see I guess.”

Biggie was getting nervous. Wendy could see that from two tables away and came by to rub his shoulders.

“Peter bugging you, Leonardo? Where are Felicia and the kids?” she asked.

“Out on deck somewhere.”

“Peter, want to go for a walk? Have a massage?”

“That sounds good. Let’s do both. Walk to our quarters and massage like we meant it.”

Biggie blushed at the conversation. Who could have guessed?

On the first night on the cruise, Marla played at the party deck's piano bar. Marla's Blues shared the African beats common in Cuban music. She sang La Bayamesa and the crowd went wild. The crowd was all Cuban including Marla, with a few exceptions. The song sounds like a fighting song The Cubans were fighting their Spanish oppressors when the song was written. It was about breaking chains and being free to do as one would.

She finished her first set, sat on the stool to my left. Wendy, with her arms through my right arm stood leaning back against the bar. Happy hour was in its last minutes. We had stayed in the ship's lounge longer than we ordinarily would at the Pirate Cove Inn. There was nowhere else to go on the boat: the outer decks, our cabins or the Play Deck.

We sat in silence watching the daylight move west across the Gulf to Mexico and toward the Pacific Ocean.

"106, my husband," Marla said. "I was in the wedding circle at the Lion's stadium in Detroit. We watched the Colorado ceremony in circles of our own. I married you and Wendy."

"I see."

"Marla, 106 is shy," Wendy said.

"No, I married everyone, so it's true we are all married," Marla said.

How is it possible that good fortune could be so hard to take? I had come on the cruise for an adventure to meet my wild imagination. Wendy came to rest and relax preparing for the hard work days of spring.

Neither of us saw Marla on our horizon and yet there we were.

"I love Marla," Wendy whispered in my ear. "I love you, sweet 106."

I am sure I was smiling. Wendy loved everybody.

"Marla," I said when I turned towards her to pass the news along. "Wendy loves you."

"I know. We are in love and you?"

“Count me in for contentment.” I said. The two women went back to the piano bar.

They opened the set with ‘106.’ What do you call that? I started worrying that I was a paranoiac. You know, I was afraid they were conspiring against me.

There are points beyond my comfort zone. This might have been one. There are times when the words one uses, even in the imagination, determine the outcome. There are times when the most important thing is to answer the question as asked. I already had rebellious characters doing unplanned things, if this book would ever end, I had to keep control of my personal life.

I mulled this problem over for the duration of the set. I missed a new song they had been working on for an hour earlier in the day. It’s about growing up and finding out the world is not a friendly place, discovering that love and loyalty make a friendly place near you. The lyrics are mine. Wendy found them in a letter, the only letter I ever wrote to her. Never mailed it. She found it when she unpacked my clothes after I had returned to the house last year.

Wendy and Marla made a slow crawl around the room spreading hugs and handshakes. Wendy kissed my ear whispering ‘tell her about you.’ She said goodnight as Marla walked up for more hugs. Wendy left for our cabin, then Marla sat next to me.

“Did you hear the new song?” Marla asked me.

“Oops. Maybe not.”

“We don’t have a name for it, but it comes from the letter you wrote to her as you realized you would return to her. Wendy sings that song with her entire life spirit. When she showed it to me, I fell in love with you. I wished it had been for me.”

She leaned over towards me placing her head gently on my shoulder and her hand on mine.

“Be gentle with me, 106. My heart might break.”

“Marla, I cannot harm you. I am a writer. People who love my words, are the people I love. I guess I might have broken Wendy’s heart, had she not decided to wait me out. It is still a mystery to me how she did that for five years.”

“106, she has never said anything to me that Northern Girl didn’t say to everyone.”

“Have you broken hearts?”

“Many. It’s the Blues. My heart has been broken, too.”

She raised her head, squeezed my hand. She stood and walked to the piano and without introduction she sang a song that sounded as old as music. The language is Creole, I think. Lwizyàn, she called it. I heard French, words with African sounds and a touch of something else older than either.

As she played and sang, I moved to the piano bar. Our eyes locked in a struggle for each other’s attention. I wanted to know her. She stirred me. I sat. She played, and the hours passed. We were alone in the bar. The staff had retired.

“106, let’s find Wendy and sleep.”

“Let’s.” There was nothing intended.

Wendy woke. We talked about the hour and the mood. I fell asleep listening to their voices and then it was morning.

The days passed, as they will. The first days of an adventure are both long and short. Time can weigh heavily in a moment and in hindsight we were surprised to see the island in the near future. It was like we had lost a day.

“Wow, Wendy there it is, a sight to see.”

“Peter, you were right not to try to write a novel.”

“Why? I like words.”

“When you were a secret agent, you were a man of mystery. Now you state the obvious as if it was mysterious.”

“I am boring. That is what you're saying.”

“I hope so. Let's go home and wait out the winter. We can sleep and eat sparsely, keeping watch for the edge of winter when the spring begins.”

“You offer romance?”

“What else is there?”

“Adventure.”

“You are looking for a younger woman?”

“Two Rum and Cokes ago I would have said I want to know who you really are.”

“Now? What do you say now?”

“Let's go out on the deck and stare out into the sea of possibilities, wander back to our quarters and try the romance thing out again.”

“Peter, you and me belong together.”

“I”

“I' what?”

“You and I”

“I am missing something.”

“I am a jerk sometimes.”

“I didn’t miss that,” Wendy said.

The trip to Havana was everything a trip to Havana could be. The uncle had things together. He had hired a private cruise to take his contingent to Havana from Barbados in a style he felt was his best foot forward.

“It’s like a great return. Someday, there will be peace and we can come back home.”

The Santa Lucia proved to be a great party boat. It sailed from Barbados’ main harbor and steamed for three days to Port Havana.

Nothing really happened that would not have happened during Pirates Cove’s happy hour, with one exception. The brothers were kept from entering Havana by the Cuban police. They were too drunk to answer questions.

Coincidentally, after a day on shore Wendy and I decided to skip the trip back to Barbados on The Santa Lucia. We found a direct flight to Quebec from the local international airport. The book was really bothering me. I could see the end from page 196 on. Soon I said, soon.

“Thanks for heading home with me. I am in a bad way. Things are not breaking for me. I need two weeks without interruption, and I can save this book from apparent disaster.”

“You sound in a bad way. Who are you channeling? Not Biggie, he wouldn’t run. It’s Peter. Something bad happened to him? Did I guess?” she asked.

“Wendy, he decided to write a book again. I have got to stop him before he gets in trouble. He doesn’t have time in the plot to finish a book or to get out of trouble.”

“106, you will have time to finish it at home.”

The Havana Harbor swallowed our small cruise ship.

Tio and the rest prepared to depart, as Wendy and I moved past them to the gang plank. We were first at the customs counter.

The Cuban officers who manned the entry gate were well dressed and convivial. There were guns, I am sure, though none were visible.

Ladies first. Wendy suppressed a smile as she looked at the young man who asked for her visa: She looked just like she did in her passport photo. They searched her purse and her overnight case.

“Gracias, Señora. Bienvenida a Cuba. Usted puede pasar.

“Hello Sargent,” I said with all the tourist-in-heaven energy I had in me. The good sergeant protector of his country immediately found and became interested in my files and my laptop even though I had not grinned just like my passport photo.

“This way Señor,” he said and drew me with my stuff to a separate table across the room, abandoning the rest of our group to wait while he carefully inspected the Randall murder file.

“Señor, who do you work for?”

“I am a writer.”

“You are a writer?”

“Yes. This is my research.”

“You are a Canadian.”

“Yes. I live in Quebec. I am traveling with my wife and friends for pleasure.” They say never to offer more information than is asked. I was two rum and cokes into the day and too chatty. I smiled.

He turned to his laptop. Typed a few lines, hit enter and stared at the screen for a few minutes. He scrolled down, looked at me, looked at the screen. He looked back at me.

“You are employed by Stratford, Ontario?”

“Old news.”

“You were once employed by Stratford, Ontario?”

“Yes. I am retired.”

“So young?”

“It’s for my health.”

Another officer arrived and as he meandered through my belongings the Sargent went back to his station at the counter.

Tio and Cuz went next with their family. They soon joined me in the waiting area.

Chuck was next.

It was a hundred and something. Humidity was oppressive. One look at Chuck and the concept of disrobing in the weather looked hazardous. His skin glowed from sweat. His meager clothing was soaked. There was no rain cloud over his head.

The Sargent took Chuck’s passport. Looked at the picture, then looked back to Chuck. Chuck was in his full regalia with his slick skull and massive tattoos easily viewed under the tank top he wore. The garish red and green snake that went up his right leg was new to me. It went under his shorts and came out again on the inside of his left thigh. The head of the snake was a Copperhead. Its tongue was flicked out down to his knee.

“Momentito, Señor.”

He reached over to a button near the end of the table and pressed it.

A ranking officer, a lieutenant by the looks of her, came out of a door adjacent to the table. She and the Sargent spoke. The Lieutenant motioned for all of us to take seats in the waiting area.

One by one the entire party, except by some miracle Wendy, was asked to place all of our things on a separate table and return to our seats. Every bag was searched and the items that were not clothing were placed in a tray next to the bag.

A long process began as the Lieutenant and the Sargent examined everything. The Sargent carried the passports. At each bag the passport of the owner was examined, and the contents of the tray examined again.

They returned to the table with my stuff. She picked up the file looked at the cover with the picture. She looked at the passports. Then the picture.

After several hours of examination, one by one my tour mates were allowed to pack their gear and depart into the streets of Havana. Tio, Biggie, Felicia, Cuz, Carlos, they all went through the guarded door to Cuban freedom.

One by one, the three of us – Bob, Chuck and I – were allowed to pack our gear. One at a time, first Bob, then Chuck and then I was brought through a different door into a windowless hallway and finally a small room with a table and six chairs. Bob and Chuck were already sitting. I was asked to join them. Two officers sat with us. Everyone was silent.

I had never been to Cuba before. No one had warned me that the Cuban immigration officers were so particular about who they let in. It made no sense to me. I thought they were becoming a destination.

A third guard entered the room and asked for Bob, they left for about half an hour.

When Bob was escorted back into the room, Chuck was taken out. Bob just sat there.

“Red tape,” he said.

Interrogations were not new to me. Private agents, such as myself, performed all the functions of a public agent. Torture is a matter of taste. Some just begin with torture, others prefer to wait. For me sitting and waiting can be torture; It wasn't the Cuban's fault.

Then it was my turn.

It was like a job interview.

“Why are you trying to enter Cuba?”

“I am a tourist.”

“Do you know Charles Payne Faulk?”

“No.”

“Why were you carrying a picture of Mr. Faulk in your luggage?”

“What do you mean?”

That was it. Except we did not leave the room right away. We waited, rather I waited. My interrogator took notes in a file. Closed the file. Bid me adios.

I was alone.

A guard, the one that fetched me to the interrogation room, returned and took me back to rejoin Bob and Chuck.

We three faced each other in silence again. Food was brought to us. We were singly taken to the interrogation room every two hours until after dark and finally I was taken to a room with a single bunk and told to sleep. They brought my luggage and some water.

The next day it began again, right after breakfast and continued all day as it had. I was getting irritated. I decided I would express my dismay, ask to hear the charges, if nothing changed the next day.

The third day began the same with the same interrogator in the same room.

“Why are you trying to enter Cuba?”

“I am a tourist.”

“Do you know Charles Payne Faulk?”

“No.”

“Why were you carrying a picture of Mr. Faulk in your luggage?”

“What do you mean? Look, I have been patient. I assume this is important to you and for some reason I empathize with you, even though I am truly pissed.”

The interrogator took a few notes. Stood and bid me adios. I was sure nothing new would happen. Then the Lieutenant entered the room and sat, took out a few

documents from her case. Her eyes were green. She wore light makeup. I wished I was Cuban. I wished she was my friend.

“Peter, is that your name?”

“I hope so because that is what my passport says.”

“Peter, is this your file?”

The Lieutenant showed me a picture of my file with the front cover visible.

“OK. It is a picture of my file,” I said deciding not to upset her.

“Do you see a picture of a man?”

“Of course, yes. I put it there.”

“Who is this man?”

“I don’t know. I wish I did. Whoever finds out will win the investigator of the year award in Florida.”

“What does that mean?”

“Newspapers made a big deal out of this. It was a double murder. That picture was sensational. That picture was taken by one of his victims and printed on the front page of a large newspaper. It spread like wildfire. Everyone in Florida is looking for that guy.”

“I see.” The Lieutenant said. She was thirtyish. Probably a mother. Not rich, not unhappy.

“You arrived on the Santa Lucia?”

“Yes.”

“Who was in your party?”

“Friends. My wife.”

“I have spoken to her. She is worried about you and sends her love.”

“Thank you for that. I have often wondered.”

“Peter, what are the names of the members of your party?”

“Wow. I don’t know how helpful I can be. Let’s see. The way I know them is Tio, Cuz, Leonardo, Felicia, Javi, Leonardo’s guy Donnie, Bob, Chuck, Carlos, Missy and Mildred. Oh and W. Lawrence Phillips.”

“I understand that W. Lawrence Phillips, is still on board.”

“OK.”

“Peter, Chuck is an Americanization of Charles.”

“You mean a nickname. Sure.”

“We may be close to solving the puzzle you gave us. It was very clever of you to steer your prey into a trap. You have skills.”

“Ah. You lost me there.”

She took notes. Said goodbye and left the room. I waited as usual. After ten minutes a man in a suit and two guards came into the room

“Señor, my name is Ramon Sanchez Alerio. My rank is Detective Sargent and I have been assigned to your case. I am sorry you have been delayed. Papers are being drafted that will help us sort this all out.”

“‘My case’? Guess I won’t be able to leave now?”

“I am sorry, sir. You see, you have been accused of being a traitor and a spy.” He said. “The good news is your wife has hired a lawyer from the capital who will see you as soon as the paperwork is completed.”

After three days in this building, I was more relieved than shocked. At least the gears were turning even if they might be about to grind me up.

“Wow. Who made that accusation?”

“A Señor Robert James Faulk, known to you as Bob.”

“What! Why?” I could have saved my breath.

“We’ll wait for the paperwork to answer more questions.” he said, “There is one more thing; your cruise ship has departed. You will be cared for as a guest in the international zone. We cannot let you into Cuba and because you will want to clear your name you will stay here. Even if you are cleared of this misunderstanding, there is the matter of the murder investigation. We have sent investigators to the scene, and we are conducting our own investigation. You are a material witness and cannot be released until the case is solved.”

Niceties were exchanged, and I was taken to the room with one bunk where I had spent the night. My folder was there. I looked through it. Nothing was missing. Something had been added. Another picture. This one was a passport photo of Chuck. I barely recognized him. What did this mean? I had a picture of Chuck. I thought I didn’t. Now I did.

Something was missing. That was the feeling. It wasn’t stuff. It was awareness. The universe was speaking, and I wasn’t listening.

Two days after the Santa Lucia returned to her home port, life at The Pirate Cove Inn was about to begin again.

Raul arrived before the re-opening to pick up the daily newspapers that had been thrown against the glass front doors since the day he left. Tio had a good idea and that was to advertise the re-opening so that anyone who might have missed the place, and not gone to Cuba, would know they were back in business.

The Pirate Cove Inn received a copy of every daily paper printed in Florida that had a local distributor. That summed to five a day. No one Raul knew read them all. He gathered the fifty papers and headed into the bar to put them down.

As he walked in, the phone was ringing. He let it ring. He was there early. Earlier than normal. He headed to the kitchen to do the prep work for the chef who would arrive to begin the breakfast menu about an hour later.

The phone rang. The phone rang again and again.

Raul could not remember the phone ringing more than twice in a morning, ever.

Tio and Cuz came in about 7:30 to play solitaire and share a pot of Cuban coffee. Raul was in the kitchen. No early morning customers had arrived.

“Hey, Cuz, where is everybody?”

“F’ing phone keeps ringing. Maybe they are waiting for someone to answer.”

“Maybe I miss the lost boys.”

“Maybe I will answer the damn thing.”

“If you do, I might grease you.”

“How about I take the phone off the hook?”

“Yeah. Good idea.”

Cuz rose slowly, walked behind the bar, picked the phone up and placed it in a stack of bar towels so no one could hear it.

“There,” he said. “Peace in our time.”

The morning was passing without paying customers. It was Monday. It could be a slow day.

Raul finished early since the chef had not anticipated very many customers. He joined his father and his father's friend. On his way over he gathered up an armload of unopened newspapers to keep him company while the old guys mumbled and cursed the vagaries of the shuffle.

"Damn I can't win for losing," Cuz said,

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means that probability says I should win some if I lose some. I have lost some. Therefore, I should win one."

"Cuz, old friend, that is not probability. That is superstition."

"Tio, oldest person I know, I am getting upset."

"Get a new deck. Get some new luck."

"Talk about superstition."

Raul had walked up to the table with the papers at a good time. Both were shuffling. He dumped his arm load into the empty space.

"Let's find and clip ads for the files. I'll get scissors."

As he walked away, Cuz put down the cards and picked up an edition of something. He did not care. The rubber band made that sound that rubber bands always make when they're stripped from a newspaper. Tio looked up from his shuffling, put down his cards and repeated Cuz' action to the very sound itself.

"What page did you buy, Tio?" Cuz asked.

"Back page section one."

The three of them opened the papers. Pulled off section one and placed it ad up on the table. Twenty-five issues had ads. Twenty-five did not.

The scissors were passed around. In ten minutes they were done.

Raul collected the ads. Cuz piled the remains. Tio looked at the mess of front pages in his lap. He picked one up and read the headline out loud. "Cuban Intelligence Solves Murder Mystery!"

He picked up another.

"Sarasota area men accused of multiple murders," Tio said. "Look what happens when we're gone."

Tio carefully stacked the front pages they had cut.

Raul found the phone in a mess of towels and placed it back on the hook. Raul liked the old phone. It stayed put. At home his phone could be carried, and left, anywhere. Making a call there meant first find the phone. Here if you walked one foot you had to put the phone down.

The phone rang immediately.

Raul answered it.

"The Pirate Cove Inn, Randy speaking."

He listened, and he listened.

Tio and Cuz were both watching his face hoping it wasn't a solicitor. Cuz hoped Raul had not forgotten how to hang up.

At last, Raul talked again.

"I have no idea what you are talking about. I just returned from vacation. Call next week."

Tio and Cuz sat waiting. The phone rang again. Raul stood still. Then in a rapid burst he spoke to Tio.

"We are about to be inundated with media. That was WCOP wanting interviews about someone named Charles Faulk who is the accused Randall case suspect," Raul said. "They claim he gave this as his home address and phone number."

As Randy talked, Cuz walked over to the TV clickers and clicked three on, tuned to different news channels. Fox was wall to wall coverage. So was CNN. "Murder Solved by Cuban Secret Service. Where was Obama?" The CNN crawl said.

Hannity was accusing his way through another interview show with Joe the Plumber who, unbeknownst to anyone was an expert on Cuban Intelligence and their ties to fish food restaurants on the Gulf side of Florida.

"What is this bullshit?" Tio shouted over the TVs. "Lock the front door. Don't let any of those a-holes in."

Too late, as a camera man followed by two reporters burst through the doors, camera blazing, microphones extended.

Tio threw a glass of ice water at them.

That had never happened before.

"This is a restaurant. Not just any restaurant. We are a family restaurant with a kids' menu. Your behavior is reprehensible, even for your kind. It is terrible even if we were not family oriented. We are good Catholics and contribute to the community." Tio was on a roll and felt he could go on. He liked the concept of being a man of few words. He loved action. He wished he had a gun, so he could fire a few rounds into the ceiling to calm them down. Maybe they got that from his rant. They stopped.

"Thank you," he said. "Please sit. Have some coffee. We can talk."

Within ten minutes the restaurant and bar were full. Randy had passed out menus and was taking drink orders.

"Tio," Cuz whispered. "The TV says that Chuck was the Randall murderer and his brother an accomplice. It says we—that is you—took them to Cuba. One of us carried a picture from the paper. Cubans saw Chuck and the picture put two and two together and arrested him to deport. His brother too."

"Ah. We can take advantage." Tio stood quiet and still. Cuz rubbed his chin hoping for inspiration. Cuz responded.

“I recognized him early. The day the picture was printed. We got loaded and I forgot it. Gusano knew. Both of the lost boys knew, I think.

“Visiting Cuba gave me powers I never imagined before. This is fun.” Cuz said.

Tio clinked a glass for quiet and attention.

“I will make an announcement now.”

There was a bustle as microphones and cameras were positioned around Tio.

Cuz couldn't help but admire his friend and canasta buddy. Tio had risen from the waves and sand to become a successful American, but deep within him was the Cuban who loved messing with Floridian heads.

“My name is Emil de Los Santos. I am an entrepreneur, a naturalized citizen who migrated from Cuba and am now the owner of the Pirate Cove Inn.” Tio stood tall. He spoke humbly.

“Not long ago two men began to frequent our establishment. They became regulars. They came to happy hour, Monday through Fridays, 4 PM until sunset. They kept to themselves.

“As I recall a member of the FBI sat at a table over there.” He pointed to a table nearest the bar. “He is important to the story because even though he frequented happy hour he made no effort to arrest Mr. Faulk though he was within feet of him.”

Tio grabbed his coffee and ceremoniously drank a sip.

“A local newspaper broke the story of the cellphone picture. I recognized him immediately. I engaged a private investigator to build a case against the obvious suspect. He accompanied me and the perpetrator to Cuba where we placed him in Cuban custody. That is the whole story.”

Tio stood waiting for questions.

Most of the media raced for the doors.

Raul watched his father from behind the bar. He had been watching his father for years amazed at how heroic he could be.

When I saw the news on Cuban TV it was about an amazing adventure. Cuba was helping to keep ex-pat Cubans safe even in the belly of the beast.

“Hey, Hon, did you see this new blog? It’s called ‘Dahlia: *A Life of Crime.*’”

“Competition, Northern Girl?”

“It just sounds familiar. Check it out. The URL is on its way down the tubes.”

“Short story.”

“She was here in Leelanau County hiding from the FBI and Interpol. Her career as an international criminal was too hot for her so she joined her mates in an early retirement. Then, ...”

“Don’t tell me, she fell in love with the man who was trying to bring her to justice and turned law abiding. He was caught by a Cuban sting operation trying to arrest international criminals. They caught him but missed her. He’s in a Cuban prison and she is living in a house in Maple City disguised in drag as a writer.”

“How’d you guess?”

“Lucky,” I said.

We were lounging in our chairs by the stove in the house. Before she took her eyes away from her laptop, we had been sitting for two hours enjoying what might be the last April day of wintry weather. I was staring out across the room, through the window into the woods.

The last storms before the weather broke for spring brought wet, heavy snows that clung to the trees dragging the branches down with the weight. The world outside the window had turned from an almost snowless spring-like day to this: a white, endlessly white, vista.

“Wendy, are we going to Florida again this winter?”

“Truth? I do not want to be so bored again.”

“You don’t like ennui?”

“I prefer excitement.”

“What about the trip to Cuba? Something to talk about. No?”

“That’s my point. We need more adventure and fewer days of trying to turn rum and coke, too much sun and sex, into a meaningful life-style.”

“Unh. That hurts. I saw it as an adventure. Then again, I am settling into home. It feels like ‘at long last.’ Yet Florida does beckon when the snow begins to blow.”

“I would go again if you needed me to, to finish your book.”

“I am done, I think.”

“How does it end?”

“Happily, ever after.”

“Is it about us?”

“No.”

“What is the title?”

“I am working on it. How about ‘The story of the lost boys – a tale of caution.’”

“Keep working. What’s next?”

“‘Cabin Fever’ a story of the ones who didn’t go to Florida for New Year’s Day.”

“Then you have answered your own question about Florida.”

“Suppose so. Let’s freeze some berries this summer for those dark winter days.”

“We could read to each other. The girls could join in and it would be one happy family.”

“The one you always dreamed of?”

“What do you think?”

“Good ending.”

After a week, I was allowed to enter Havana.

Tears ran down my cheeks. The Cubans knew everything about me by then. The Lieutenant and I had had a number of long discussions about the nature of life in Florida.

After one such interview, I was taken to the room with the table instead of the room with the cot.

I sat there by myself. Waiting had stopped being torturous to me.

The door opened and the Lieutenant came through the door. She was out of uniform, dressed in casual and cool clothing.

“You are free to enter,” she said. She was smiling. I was probably smiling.

“I’ll miss you,” I said. “I have fallen for my captor.”

“You are free to enter only if you have a guard to escort you. I am the guard.”

“I see,” I said. She was still smiling. “I am ready to leave captivity.”

We walked through the guarded doors into a public place. The sounds of voices. The glare of activity. I was shocked coming from a week in quiet.

She put her hand on my arm to get my attention.

“The regulations call for handcuffs. I have an alternative. You must hold my hand. We can appear to be good friends. If we see people, I know I might refer to you as my novio. It is a term of art meaning captive to those who know.”

“You are a funny person.” I said. I looked into her eyes and saw ulterior motives all over her face.

We walked hand in hand across a mile or more of Havana. The conversation was more interesting than the neighborhoods. As the afternoon progressed a café on the beach caught her attention. A cup of coffee, a local version of a scone, a shot of brandy with a beach view with lovers passing by enjoying the beautiful day, as we sat enjoying each other’s stories.

Amelia Flores y Flores, Lieutenant in the Cuban Immigration Service sat with me at a seaside café with seats facing the Caribbean. We were sharing a coffee watching the gulls riding the wind.

“Amigo mio, I have a house I built with the help of past lovers. Is that OK with you? If it is, I want you to stay. Can you imagine that?”

Amelia Flores y Flores told me she had two children. They lived in a house on land that her grandparents had given her. The house was a bit ramshackle, built by lovers who wanted to please her. She laughed as she told the story, admitted to her fickle nature and drew a comparison between her and her classmates who had lost their desire for adventure.

“I have an idea,” she said. “You will be placed in my custody. That means you can move out of the international zone, move into my house.”

“Lieutenant Flores, you are taking advantage of me.”

“You are not married to the woman you called your wife.”

“She says she loves me.”

“Which counts more love or possession?”

“Am I a prisoner?”

“No, you are a lover.”

“Not yet.”

“Wendy wrote a letter to you, saying that she has taken Mildred and Missy back to Michigan with her. She is now practicing Santeria. The change happened suddenly on her way home aboard the Santa Lucia. She mentioned the name Carlos. She said he is a plumber. She said you would understand.”

“Understand? No. Accept? Yes. She is a criminal mind in search of a major crime.” I looked at Amelia. I looked out at the Caribbean.

“Maybe you could write a book about finding the murderer.”

“You found him.”

“You found me,” she said.



What happens when a writer's book in progress, a narrative about his lover, leaps from the real to the imaginary. The story follows the writer and his lover as they travel from the woods of Michigan to the shores of Florida and then to Cuba. The writer writes while his lover and acquaintances become the characters and his characters become criminals. A crime is committed in reality. A crime requires a solution even if it is imaginary.